

‘The *Absolute* Event of History’: The Shoah and the Outside¹

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Abstract

The article analyses two sorts of disaster considered in Maurice Blanchot’s *L’Écriture du désastre* (1980): the Shoah and the approach of the Outside. Blanchot’s account of suffering is examined, as is the role that Blanchot’s reading of Robert Antelme’s *L’Espece humaine* (1947) plays in *L’Écriture du désastre*. Differences between concentration camps and extermination camps are detailed, and it is questioned whether fragmentary writing is capable of responding to the horror of the Shoah in an adequate manner.

Keywords: *Absolute, Antelme, Auschwitz, Disaster, Experience, Fragments, Shoah*

We often think of *L’Écriture du désastre* (1980) as being Blanchot’s reflections on two things above all, the utter horror of the Shoah and the anguish produced by the approach of the Outside, both of which he calls disaster; and when we read the work with that assumption in mind we find ourselves unsettled by the question how the two things hang together, if indeed they do.² That Anglophones are encouraged to read *L’Écriture du désastre* in just that way is evident: in English the title of the translation reads *The Writing of the Disaster* [my emphasis], and even before we open the text we are invited to think of HaShoah above all. For the 1986 cloth edition has a cover image of what seems to be a disfigured scroll, while the 1995 paperback edition reproduces on its cover a fragment of the Torah that had been used as a backdrop for Nazi executions of Jews in Pultusk, Poland; it is preserved now in the Holocaust Memorial Museum in

¹ This paper was first given at a seminar, ‘Phenomenology and the Disaster’, organized by Jeffrey McCurry at the Simon Silverman Phenomenology Center, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh. My thanks to Professor McCurry and all involved in the seminar.

² See, for instance, Michael Syrotinski, *Deconstruction and the Postcolonial* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 117, and Gary D. Mole, *Levinas, Blanchot, Jabès: Figures of Estrangement* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 15. The association of disaster and the Shoah in Blanchot’s *L’Écriture du désastre* is marked in Holocaust Studies. See, for example, Naomi Mandel, *Against the Unspeakable: Complicity, the Holocaust, and Slavery in America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 32. Geoffrey Hartman relates Blanchot to the Shoah in several places in two important works. See his *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), 2, 10, 96, 162, and esp. 39. Also see Hartman’s introduction to his edited collection of essays, *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994), 5. Finally, see his essay, ‘Maurice Blanchot: The Spirit of Language after the Holocaust’, *The Power of Contestation: Perspectives on Maurice Blanchot*, ed. Kevin Hart and Geoffrey H. Hartman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 46-65. A caveat is entered on p. 53. It should also be noted that the most detailed reading of *L’Écriture du désastre* to date is offered by Leslie Hill in his *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing: A Change of Epoch* (London: Continuum, 2012), ch. 4, and that he draws on Shoah testimony.

Washington, DC.³ In French the title has been pointed in exactly the same direction though in another way entirely, by Claude Lanzmann's widely discussed documentary film *Shoah* (1985), the script of which the filmmaker calls 'writing of disaster'.⁴ And perhaps Blanchot's reference to the film a year after it was shown has helped to secure for some of his more devoted readers the Shoah as the primary reference of his work.⁵

There is of course good reason to object, right at the start, that Blanchot uses the word '*désastre*' many times before he does so in *L'Écriture du désastre*. Like many French men and women, he refers to the defeat of France in June 1940 as '*le désastre*', and that was long before the Shoah occurred.⁶ And one might point out that only a few of the 403 fragmentary passages in the text address the Shoah in any way at all.⁷ As we read *L'Écriture du désastre* we find ourselves faced with elliptic ponderings about desire and disaster (each word derives from Latin, the one from *de sidere* and the other from *dis + astro*, so both allude to stars); we encounter thoughts about moral responsibility for the other person (especially as investigated by Levinas), about the immemorial loss of selfhood (in particular with respect to Donald Winnicott and Serge Leclaire); we are asked to read two 'primal scenes' of apprehending the Outside, one apparently autobiographical (Blanchot as a child), and one about the poet as an anti-Narcissus; and we are incidentally invited to reflect about atheism, *Ereignis*, forgiveness, the gift, Jena Romanticism, Jewish Messianism, and other topics. *L'Écriture du désastre* is an archipelago of remarks, injunctions, broodings, anecdotes, somber lyrical riffs, and questions, and the Shoah is perhaps not even at what we might be tempted to call its centre. A better candidate for that position, if one really wants to read the text against its grain, would be the prose poem '(Une scène primitive?)' in which Blanchot appears as a child receiving a joyful revelation that there is no God, no overarching meaning to reality.⁸ Yet even if the Shoah is not the animating concern of the text, the very fact that it is one of the topics leagued with the thought of the Outside rouses us to query the link purportedly between them.

³ The cloth edition of the translation does not give a source for the cover image. On inquiring about the image, Nebraska University Press informed me that they have no record of the image, and that the cover artist is deceased.

⁴ Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust*, pref. Simone de Beauvoir (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), xii.

⁵ See Blanchot, 'Do Not Forget!', trans. Leslie Hill, *Paragraph 30*: 3 (2007), 35.

⁶ See Blanchot, 'Après le désastre', *Journal des Débats*, July 7, 1940, 1.

⁷ For example, Blanchot writes, 'Kafka's narratives are among the darkest in literature, the most rooted in absolute disaster', *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 10. With regard to the number of fragments on the Shoah, I count no more than seven (see 6, 47, 81, 82, 83, 143), although there may be many more that are implicitly about it. For instance, the fragments about calm: Blanchot plays on the root, *calma* (Old Spanish), which means heat of the day and hence, indirectly might allude to the burning of corpses in the extermination camps. I should add that on other occasions when Blanchot evokes the Shoah he does not always use the word '*désastre*'. For example, in 'Thinking the Apocalypse' he does not, while in 'Do Not Forget' he does. See *Political Writings, 1953-1993*, trans. and intro. Zakir Paul and intro. Kevin Hart (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 121, 127. I shall not consider in this essay what might be regarded as Blanchot's anticipation of the Shoah in 'The Idyll' and his reflection on it in 'After the Fact.' See *Vicious Circles: Two Fictions and 'After the Fact'*, trans. Paul Auster (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1985), esp. 65-66. See on this motif Sarah Kofman, *Smothered Words*, trans. Madeleine Dobie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998).

⁸ I offer a detailed reading of this passage in my *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), ch. 3.

Is there a connection between the Shoah as a disaster and the disaster that Blanchot associates early and late with writing? Blanchot himself give us reason to doubt it, since he says, early in the gathering of fragments, 'I will not say that the disaster [*le désastre*] is absolute; on the contrary, it disorients the absolute.'⁹ And then, much later, we read, '*The holocaust, the absolute event of history — which is a date in history — that utter-burn [cette toute-brûlure] where all history took fire [...]*'¹⁰ At first it is puzzling to hear tell of any historical event as 'absolute', since we would generally regard all events as unavoidably conditioned by the historical processes that envelop them. No event absolves itself from time and place; historians trace the causes and the effects of even the Shoah. Hegel's God is the *absolute Idee*, being in and for itself, and his Incarnation could be construed as an absolute event in world history (although Hegel does not write in just those terms). Yet Blanchot is thinking the absolute otherwise, not as historically unconditioned but as an event that stands apart from all others in Western history, including many others that should still appal us — the Armenian massacres, the Gulag, the 'ethnic cleansing' of the Bosnian War, to name only a few in modern times — or that share certain traits with the Shoah; and this claim of being set apart from all other events is presumably justified by the Nazi quest to murder all Jews, regardless of the cultural, religious, intellectual, moral, political or physical determinants that distinguish us one from another, by the efficiency of the modern bureaucratic machine that killed without passion, and also by dint of their view that 'the final solution' would benefit the world.¹¹

Two issues come quickly to the fore. The first concerns whether the Shoah can properly be called 'absolute' in the sense of unique and what can follow from this sort of claim. Presumably, if the Shoah is held to be unique in history it must be in a sense that is qualitatively distinct from that of other historical events, which are themselves unique even if similar to many other events, and I have already given three criteria that justify such a claim. To maintain that the Shoah is absolutely unique, whether by way of Nazi intention or by way the emerging function of the extermination camps, is to distinguish it from all other atrocities, though one cannot with any confidence extend the claim to the future. We have no idea what sort of dire events may come later this

⁹ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 4.

¹⁰ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 47. Blanchot quotes himself in 'Do Not Forget', *Political Writings*, 128. He refers to the Shoah as 'an absolute which interrupted history' in *The Step Not Beyond*, trans. and intro. Lycette Nelson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 114, he speaks of it as an 'absolute caesura' in 'Thinking the Apocalypse', *Political Writings*, 122, and he writes of World War II as 'an *absolute*' because of the Shoah in 'War and Literature', *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 109. Also see, in the same stream, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's evocation of the Shoah as 'pure event', *Heidegger, Art and Politics*, trans. Chris Turner (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 45.

¹¹ On killing without passion, it must be noted that the SS were characteristically normal German men with no history of sadism before being assigned work in the camps. That alcohol was used and abused by some of the SS when performing their duty, and that this led to states of passion, must be conceded. See Hermann Langbein, *People in Auschwitz*, trans. Harry Zohn, foreword Henry Friedlander (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 273-301. Hannah Arendt, who also holds that the Shoah is an interruption of history, stresses the role of the passionless bureaucrat in evil in her *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1964). For her comments on the uniqueness of the extermination camps, see her *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. and intro. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 109, 199, 243. Finally, it must be noted that gas chambers have been reported to have been used in Croatia and North Korea in modern times.

century or in another century. There may be genocide that is even more cruelly and more efficiently achieved, whether directed at the Jews or another people. There is always the possibility that the Shoah may have to yield its status as being absolutely unique to being relatively unique, which of course is not to diminish its horror one jot. Related to this first concern is the consequence of speaking of the Shoah in ways that separate it qualitatively from all other monstrosities. For it can always be appealed to in a rhetorical manner to distract attention from other instances of human wickedness, including those that were contemporaneous with it (the barbarities of the Russians as they moved towards the Eastern Front, for example), and it can be used to support aggressive policies, such as those that affect the Palestinians, for instance.

The second issue is internal to Blanchot's thought. We may wonder if the advent of the Outside can indeed disorient something incommensurable with other historical events, something that interrupts them and cannot be measured by them, no matter how abhorrent they have been. At the same time, even if we know *L'Espace littéraire* (1955) and the other writings where Blanchot broods on the approach of the Outside, we shall surely wonder how this disaster can be figured in the context of history, and in the history of the Shoah in particular, and, if it can, what its pertinence there might be. We are likely to think first of the Outside as it almost touches and certainly disconcerts the writer, if only because that scene is so starkly lit in Blanchot's earlier works. In writing — intransitive writing, as he emphasizes — one passes from an 'I' to a 'he' or a 'she' or an 'it' [*il*]; one becomes other than what one presumes to be one's self. Of course, one's empirical ego remains, as does the constituting ego; but one generates what Husserl would call a phenomenological onlooker.¹² Unlike Husserl, though, Blanchot insists that this observer does not perceive the being of phenomena but their loss of being. For when writing one brushes against a non-world of image. We remember that signal and terrifying essay 'La littérature et le droit à la mort' (1949) and the counter-intuitive sense of literature that is given there, of something that seems interior to the writer being in fact 'the outside' [*le dehors*].

In a thoroughly Nietzschean manner Blanchot often thinks of art by way of the artist, not the work, and he does so when thinking of the Outside. Disaster is evoked primarily with respect to writing, and it involves anguish for the author, while, in a phased counterpart, reading involves the communication of contact with the origin, the loss of reality as it passes into image, and calls forth a 'light, innocent yes' from the reader, an affirmation of the neutral.¹³ Yet one hardly thinks of Blanchot, like Nietzsche, regarding art as a value for life. Art is an 'experience through which the consciousness discovers its being in its inability to lose consciousness, in the movement whereby, as it disappears, as it tears itself away from the meticulousness of an I.' This fraught consciousness, he goes on to say, 'is re-created beyond consciousness as an impersonal spontaneity, the desperate eagerness of a haggard knowledge which knows nothing, which no-one knows, and which ignorance always discovers behind itself as its

¹² See Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977), 35. Eugen Fink clarifies the phenomenological onlooker, distinguishing 'him' or 'her', from the empirical ego and the constituting ego in his *Sixth Cartesian Meditation: The Idea of a Transcendental Theory of Method, with Textual Notations by Edmund Husserl*, trans. and intro. Ronald Bruzina (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

¹³ See Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), VI, esp. 196. Yet Blanchot says, decades later, 'Reading is anguish', because it requires each reader to make a leap. This seems to be a different thing from facing the Outside, however. See *The Writing of the Disaster*, 10.

own shadow changed into a gaze.'¹⁴ Art compromises the nothingness of death, then; it grants the artist a ghastly quasi-resurrection on either side of the grave, a non-life of consciousness without selfhood, each time it is viewed or read. Horace's restrained self-consolation over his mortality by having written well — *non omnis moriar* (Odes III: 30) — becomes for Blanchot something more like a threat of secular damnation than a pagan hope of salvation. Several years after 'La littérature et le droit à la mort', in *L'Espace littéraire*, Blanchot speaks in words that make the Outside seem even less attractive. Art, he says there, indicates 'the menacing proximity of a vague and vacant outside, a neutral existence, nil and limitless; art points into a sordid absence, a suffocating condensation where being ceaselessly perpetuates itself as nothingness.'¹⁵ Given that, why write?

Because literature, and art generally, puts us directly in touch with the truth; we may avoid the complicated detour of philosophy. Art does not bring us to the 'true world' or even the 'apparent world' but, as Nietzsche saw, to the space we can enter when we twist free of the distinction.¹⁶ For Blanchot, art conducts us to image, and image evacuates being as such yet without leaving a simple void that at a pinch could be regarded as at least pure. Image, note, not images: Blanchot does not prize the coruscating visual figure, such as one finds so memorably in poems by Eliot, Pound and Williams, but insists on writing leading the author into a state of image understood as a circular passage from being to nothingness and from nothingness back to being. And here we begin to see what it could mean to say that the writer is only *approached* by the Outside, since all that he or she experiences is a movement from reality to non-reality, one that can always be cut short by a sudden return to reality. In truth, it is the author who almost touches the Outside by writing; and it cannot appear as phenomenon because strictly it is without being. Also, it must be pointed out that the author elicits experience of the Outside by the act of writing (or even, Blanchot suggests, in the wake of writing).¹⁷ Yet because one cannot master this experience — because, for Blanchot, image does not supply the traction one needs for experience — it has the phenomenological sense of coming over the writer, like a mood. It is as though works of literature were icons of the Outside, and the writers, aberrant icon makers, were fascinated by the dark gaze that comes from the Outside even as they attend to the job in hand.

If this sense of losing the possibility of mastery in the act of writing is honestly acknowledged, Blanchot thinks, the work before one cannot be fashioned into a whole. Fragmentary texts or those that spill over into endless discourse are therefore to be regarded as testimonies to the artist's struggle with disaster. By the time of *L'Entretien infini* (1969) he speaks of writing that devotes itself 'solely to itself as something that remains without identity, and little by little brings forth possibilities that are entirely other: an anonymous, distracted, deferred, and dispersed way of being in relation', which is precisely what he calls the Outside.¹⁸ Blanchot commends those writers — Sade, Kafka, Artaud and Char, among others — who variously allow themselves to

¹⁴ Blanchot, 'Literature and the Right to Death', trans. Lydia Davis, *The Work of Fire*, 331-32.

¹⁵ Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 242-43.

¹⁶ See Friedrich Nietzsche, 'How the 'Real World' at Last Became a Myth', *Twilight of the Idols*, in *Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ*, trans. and intro. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 40-41.

¹⁷ See Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 7, 11, 12.

¹⁸ Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xii.

yield to the Outside as it impinges on them and produce works that upset the canons of literary mastery and the pleasures of *le beau style* whether by seeking to say everything (Sade and Proust, for instance) or by trying to write in a fragmentary way (Joubert and Char, for example). Inevitably, we wonder about those writers — Homer and Vergil, Shakespeare and Racine, Richardson and Goethe, among so many others — whose works seem not to fit into Blanchot's canon. Did they never accede to the Outside? Or, if they did, did they refuse to take it with all due seriousness?

I leave these questions to echo without answers, for two reasons. In the first place, Blanchot's heavy emphasis on the author, not the work, makes it impossible to give satisfactory answers: we would need to know about the author's experience when composing which is generally hidden from us. And in the second place, the criterion of surrendering to the Outside seems to be very flexible. One could say, for instance, that Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67) is, in its relentless digressions, repetitions and amplifications, like Sade's *Juliette* (1797-1801) and so exceeds most social and cultural norms in its desire to say everything, not always by way of scandalously revealing what Christian morality condemns but by writing intransitively and thereby secreting things that are usually directed to an end, subordinated to it and even hidden in deference to it. The Outside cannot be used as a means of doing literary criticism, especially practical criticism; for, as Levinas rightly observes, *L'Espace littéraire* is 'beyond all critique and all exegesis'; it is reflection on the act of writing, not evaluation of particular pieces of writing.¹⁹ Nonetheless, we are likely to remain puzzled by the status of Blanchot's canon within the canon (or perhaps canon apart from the canon).

Yet the Outside is not always so inscrutable. At first glance, it may well seem that Blanchot's view of it changes quite significantly from 1955 to 1969. In the later period it is associated not with 'a sordid absence' that invisibly preys upon the writer who becomes in our eyes almost heroic in his or her endurance of it but rather with a new way of being human, indeed, with a utopian vision of society, a 'communism beyond communism', as he puts it at the very end of the 'Note' to *L'Entretien infini*. The appearance is deceptive, since Blanchot had regarded communism as 'an affirmation that is entirely *other*' long before *les événements de mai* 1968, indeed as early as 1955 when he had also perceived its convergence with the experience of the artist.²⁰ The potential political dimension of the Outside is underlined in 'L'homme de la rue' (1962) where we are told that the person on the street is always on the verge of becoming 'political man'.²¹ Certainly the person on the street can always spontaneously join *une manifestation*, but public demonstrations are only a small part of political life. One can become politicized by reading a newspaper or by listening to the radio at home. Nonetheless, the claim makes one think about the possible range and nature of the Outside, and the thought shall remain with us. Yet while a canon of writers and a form of politics can certainly be commended as more preferable than others, one could not do the same for any historical event, let alone those that are dire, the Shoah above all. It seems to be one thing, then, to mark an unexpected convergence between art and a

¹⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, 'The Poet's Vision', *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 127.

²⁰ See Blanchot, 'On One Approach to Communism', *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 97.

²¹ Blanchot, 'Everyday Speech', *The Infinite Conversation*, 241.

political program, especially one seen through utopian lenses, and quite another to discern a conjunction between the Shoah and the Outside.

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As we have already seen, in *L'Écriture du désastre* Blanchot uses the word 'holocaust', which is problematic because of its suggestion that the attempted annihilation of the Jews was a sacrifice.²² The Hebrew האוישה, 'catastrophe' or 'calamity', has a stronger claim to denote the event. The first recorded use of it in English, according to the OED, is 1967, and it appears to have been used much in French only after Lanzmann's film. As a common noun it is a biblical word — see, for instance, Zeph. 1: 15 — though nowadays in Modern Hebrew, when the singular form *HaShoah* is used, it names the Nazi attempt to annihilate Jewry in Europe.²³ Hebrew-speaking Jews have used the word as early as the German invasion of Poland, years before the discovery of the extermination camps.²⁴ One might well translate האוישה by 'désastre', as Lanzmann suggests, yet Blanchot figures the meaning of the latter word by way of a creative etymology: he does not follow the usual semantic path, regarding a disaster as something ill-fated because of the unfavourable position of a planet but takes another path and thinks of it as the state of 'being separated from the star', a 'break with every form of totality', and the condition of having to wander without a fixed point of orientation.²⁵ These senses of the word seem more adequate to the uprising in Paris of 1968 than to what was suffered at Auschwitz and the other death camps. We may also ponder whether Blanchot's endless meditation on death and dying is appropriate to what we know of the camps. For Auschwitz names murder, rather than death, evokes terror and dehumanizing treatment of men, women and children rather than 'the ease of dying.'²⁶

In searching for a plausible connection between the Shoah and the Outside we note that Blanchot proposes a duality of an unusual sort, one that involves the phenomenal, on the one hand, and something neutral that purportedly precedes it, on the other. The duality is given as an injunction: 'there must always [*il faut toujours*] be at least two languages, or two requirements: one dialectical, the other not; one apart, cut off both from being and from not-being.'²⁷ Dedicated readers of Blanchot will recall a similar dictum in *L'Entretien infini*, one phrased by way of continuous action: naming the possible and responding to the impossible.²⁸ Exactly what motivates and justifies the

²² Yet the word 'holocaust' was itself not used at first in connection with the attempt to exterminate the Jews. See Gerd Korman, 'The Holocaust in American Historical Writing', *Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications*, ed. John K. Roth and Michael Berenbaum (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 45-50.

²³ For most Jews, especially those in Israel, HaShoah is remembered each year on Yom HaShoah which, since 1953, occurs on the twenty-seventh of Nisan.

²⁴ Reservations about using the word 'Shoah' have been voiced. Dominick LaCapra, for one, notes that '[f]or an American to use the term *Shoah* may have a slightly exoticizing potential', *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014[2001]), 160.

²⁵ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 2, 73. Yet see Blanchot's remarks on etymology, 96, 106, 116, 119.

²⁶ See Blanchot, 'The Ease of Dying', *Friendship*, 149-68. It should be made clear, right at the start, that "Auschwitz" names what became three interconnected camps — Auschwitz I (Auschwitz main camp), II (Birkenau), and III (Monowitz) — and that there were forty-five sub-camps around it. A separate camp for Gypsies, the *Zigeunerfamilienlager*, was established at Auschwitz II.

²⁷ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 20.

²⁸ See Blanchot, 'The Great Refusal', *The Infinite Conversation*, 48.

necessity of these charges to us is unclear, as is their status. Are they regulative norms, moral commands, political precepts, or pragmatic ways of coping with reality? Are they beliefs of some sort?

When we read *L'Écriture du désastre* a little more closely we may not find definite answers to these questions, although we may well become clearer about the aim and scope of the duality. We realize that it turns on a distinction between experience and non-experience, event and non-event, and we understand that no straight line divides the two, for non-experience shares a decisive trait with experience, what we might call intransitive endurance. We see that the duality involves a contrast between work and absence of work, the freedom of a subject to think and act and the passivity of a prisoner (in a concentration camp) or a hostage (in a moral situation as Levinas sees it).²⁹ And we also understand that the distinction places an entire philosophical thematic — perhaps even “philosophy” itself — on one side and something else on the other with no possibility of reconciling or overcoming the two. So one language is ‘dialectical’, presumably Hegelian or Marxist but maybe also Socratic and Medieval (as part of the trivium), and the other language is neutral, given neither to dialectic nor to fusion, and is cued to the Outside.

In reflecting on this distinction we may well question whether we can rightly separate experience and non-experience so simply in reference to the ‘I’. There are large-scale events that exceed the possibility of being grasped by any individual or even a group or a generation, and the same might be said of micro-events. Social history does not seem to be wholly written with Blanchot’s sense of experience in play.³⁰ And there are passive syntheses that structure personal experience of which we are quite unaware unless we engage in a genetic phenomenological investigation, which is rare in the extreme. The reservation is important, for it is entirely possible for the distinction Blanchot draws to foreclose on appropriate distinctions essential for understanding how inmates acted and reacted in the camps. It allows for those inmates to be conceived entirely as victims and not to have the slightest agency when testimony and history speak otherwise. The Fortunoff Video Archive provides oral historical evidence (with all the problems of fallible memory involved) of individual Jews who were determined to defy the Nazis as long as their strength allowed them to do anything.³¹ And we somberly remember the *Sonderkommando* revolt of October 1944.

Another reflection on the distinction leads us to quite other areas. We would be wrongheaded to characterize the second language Blanchot identifies as anti-philosophical, and mistaken even to regard it as simply non-philosophical (as ‘literary’ or ‘testimonial’, for example). For while Western thought has never quite been able to name the Outside, has never fully been able to come to terms with its neutrality, it has nonetheless almost touched on it from time to time. Apophatic theology with its characteristic syntax of neither-nor has been in the service of approaching an ineffable deity when, according to Blanchot, it should have been used to identify the Outside.³²

²⁹ See Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 59.

³⁰ See, for example, Bernard Lepetit, ed., *Les formes de l'expérience: Une autre histoire sociale* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995).

³¹ A signal testimony in the Fortunoff Archive in this spirit is that of Helen K., Tape A-35.

³² See Michel Foucault, ‘Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside’, in Blanchot, *Michel Foucault as I Imagine Him* and Foucault, *Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman and Brian Massumi (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 16. Also see Foucault’s reference to Blanchot, as one of

Heraclitus and Nietzsche, to name two important figures in Blanchot's philosophical canon, have sometimes broached the Outside in their thinking. So too, if one detaches God from the movement of his thought, has Levinas; and we must remember that Blanchot's fragmentary text has a genesis in a reading of *Autrement qu'être* (1974).³³ The other person is radically outside me, beyond the net of my intentional rapports with the world. He or she is indeed an enigma, not a phenomenon. Yet it is Nietzsche's thought of the eternal return that generates a main problematic of Blanchot's extended work. (Strictly speaking, we should say this work elaborates eternal return without the thought of the will to power or, rather, with a certain understanding of passivity.³⁴) How can the Outside return if it is not a phenomenon in the first place? How can we ever discover the Outside if it does not manifest itself according to the order of phenomena? Is it always thought and therefore, as Kant tells us, not phenomenal?

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We have already heard part of an answer to the second question in thinking about the artist's relation with image. Yet Blanchot approaches it from another perspective in *L'Entretien infini*, in a long meditation on poetry and the sacred, elicited by a reading of Yves Bonnefoy's *L'Improbable* (1959). One prompt to becoming aware of the Outside, Blanchot thinks, is our consciousness of internal time. We would be drawn into 'an entirely other experience', he writes, 'if it happened that this experience were that of a time out of synchrony and as though deprived of the dimension of passing beyond, henceforth neither passing nor ever having had to pass.'³⁵ This experience is not difficult to find, he tells us, for it may be discerned 'in the most common suffering, and first of all in physical suffering.' (So for Blanchot thought, even agonizing thought, cannot be strictly identical with disaster.) He is not considering the case of undergoing sharp or even blunt pain, for then, hard though it may be, one knows that the misery will end, even if that end is death. Instead, he has in mind suffering without any end: no point and no terminus.

What happens in this state? 'Suffering has simply lost its hold on time, and has made us lose time. Would we then be freed in this state from any temporal perspective and redeemed, saved from time as it passes? Not at all: we are delivered over to another time — to time as other, as absence and neutrality; precisely to a time that can no longer redeem us, that constitutes no recourse. A time without event, without project, without possibility; not that pure immobile instant, the spark of the mystics, but an unstable perpetuity in which we are arrested and incapable of permanence, a time neither abiding nor granting the simplicity of a dwelling place.'³⁶ Suffering leads us not above phenomena but, as it were, beneath them. It leads us out of the illusions of a permanent supersensible world that we can touch in contemplative prayer, and away too from the pagan consolation of living in a given place with long inherited pieties to cherish and practice.³⁷

the heralds of the modern *episteme*, in *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 384.

³³ See Blanchot, 'Discourse sur la patience', *Le Nouveau Commerce* 30-31 (1975) : 19-44.

³⁴ See, among other places, Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*, trans. Lycette Nelson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 11-16, 21-23, 29, 40-42, and *The Infinite Conversation*, 272-80, 148-50, 158-59.

³⁵ Blanchot, 'The Great Refusal', 44.

³⁶ Blanchot, 'The Great Refusal', 44.

³⁷ See Blanchot, 'Being Jewish', *The Infinite Conversation*, 125.

This train of thought allows me to turn briefly to a question raised a little earlier, whether belief is involved in any way in affirming the Outside. Blanchot is eager to reassure us that disaster cannot be figured in the register of belief or faith; if anything, he writes, it is commensurate with ‘*a sort of disinterest*’ because the approach of the Outside deflects the ‘I’ towards the third person.³⁸ Yet we may well pause before accepting his view, in part because the Outside does not seem to be anything one could establish as true by sound and valid arguments and in part because we do not find it affirmed in common or even uncommon human experience in any clear or definite manner. Could Blanchot’s thought of the Outside be a belief in a non-religious sense, something unlike a Catholic *actus fidei* or Lutheran *fiducia*? Nietzsche figures belief as ‘a considering-something-true.’³⁹ For Heidegger, Nietzsche’s thought of the eternal return is a belief in just this sense; it determines ‘*how the world essentially is*’, namely perpetual becoming: the eternal return is ‘the Being that determines all beings.’⁴⁰ In the same way, one might suggest that for Blanchot the approach of the Outside, disaster, which itself is said to recur eternally, is how things are, with the caveat that it is not the Being of beings or even what he will come to prefer to call *Sein*, a non-metaphysical understanding of Being.⁴¹ Indeed, at several points in *L’Écriture du désastre* Blanchot proposes that disaster is thought (apparently using the ‘is’ of identity), and if so this would be why it could return without ever being a phenomenon. For, as we say, thoughts return to us.

When Blanchot writes of suffering he does so in a Heideggerian manner, one that breathes the air of his first seminars in which there was talk, partly directed against Husserl, of a reduction from beings to being.⁴² Suffering prompts reduction of an unusual kind, Blanchot thinks, not from the natural attitude to the transcendental attitude, as for Husserl, but from the world of meaning and work to the non-world of the Outside and idling. We pass from one understanding of “experience” to another, from that which we can master by the activity of an ‘I’, whether empirical or transcendental, to that which imperils us by dispossessing us of such mastery.⁴³ One of the burdens of *L’Écriture du désastre* is that the Outside never quite becomes an event or an experience, and so it is strictly immemorial. It is not that one enjoys substantial selfhood and then, by dint of an accident, loses it; one has never had it in the first place. In being led back to the Outside through the experience of suffering one realizes that the ‘I’ has never been established, certainly not in the way that Descartes thought possible. One is a subject, if one is, legally and politically but not metaphysically. ‘In a sense’, Blanchot writes, ‘the “I” cannot be lost, because it does not belong to itself. It only is, therefore, not its own, and therefore as always already lost’ and, later we find the lapidary

³⁸ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 2.

³⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), § 15.

⁴⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), 129.

⁴¹ See Blanchot’s comments on ‘being without being’ in *The Infinite Conversation*, 47.

⁴² See Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. and intro. Albert Hofstadter, rev. ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 21. There are clear parallels between what Blanchot says of suffering and what Heidegger says of deep boredom. See Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), §§ 29-36.

⁴³ See my essay ‘Une réduction infini’, *Cahier de l’Herne: Maurice Blanchot*, ed. Eric Hoppenot and Dominique Rabaté (2014), 323-28.

paradox, "'I' die before being born.'⁴⁴ So the approach of the Outside is a disaster, but not one in a series of empirical events, catastrophic or tragic, that could be detailed over the course of a life.⁴⁵ Instead, it is an unmooring from any sure thing that had it actually existed would have served to guide us or insulate us: God, the One, the Self, Truth, and so on.

In Blanchot's discussion of Bonnefoy it is 'the most common suffering' that attunes us to the Outside: not anything sharp but 'a phantom of suffering', a dulling of the 'I'.⁴⁶ Yet it must be said in all simplicity that the suffering endured in the camps was uncommon in the extreme, all the more so as concentration camps became extermination camps. So once again it must be asked what link, if any, there is between the Shoah and the approach of the Outside. I think the question can be answered in two ways, one from a great distance and another from up very close to his texts. In the first place, one might say that, for Blanchot, what led to the possibility of the Shoah was not the pervasive nihilism in Europe between the wars but rather a lack of thought about what had long been happening in Europe, beginning with Hegel but not confined to him or to philosophy: a sense that the West had consummated its own end, and that the consequences of this exhaustion needed to be thought through so that the end did not repeat itself ever more violently in history.⁴⁷ Only if one writes in a certain way — the fragmentary — can what he calls the 'absolute event of history' be deflected from happening again in another form.⁴⁸ By promoting 'an anonymous, distracted, deferred, and dispersed way of being in relation', such writing will eventually shift all that we have valued in the West — God, Self, Truth, and so on — and enable us to move to a 'communism beyond communism', beyond the violence of the 1917 Revolution which was itself a consequence of failing to think the end of the West.⁴⁹

We have a moral responsibility to make that shift precisely because of the Shoah. As Blanchot says, in a letter to Bernard-Henri Lévi (but addressing the dead of Auschwitz), 'You who are now dead, you who died for us and often because of us (because of our shortcomings) [*O morts, morts pour nous et souvent par nous (par notre défaut)*] you must not be allowed to die a second time, and silence must not mean that you sink into oblivion.'⁵⁰ (Note the motif of sacrifice — *morts pour nous* — that is one with the very word 'Holocaust' and that Blanchot nowhere examines.) In the second place, an answer comes into focus for us when we recognize that in *L'Écriture du désastre* Blanchot does not attend principally to the actual murder of Jews and others at Treblinka, Belzec, Sobibor, Chelmo and Auschwitz itself. His concern, rather, is with the affliction of the prisoners, and the fragments in question see into that dark world through what a historian would regard as a narrow aperture. For Blanchot relies very

⁴⁴ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 64, 101.

⁴⁵ See Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 3.

⁴⁶ Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 45.

⁴⁷ This view is grounded in Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel: Leçons sur la "Phénoménologie de l'Esprit professées de 1933 à 1939*, ed. Raymond Queneau (Paris: Gallimard, 1947). Also see Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes*, 12 vols, V (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 369-71, and Blanchot, *Le Très-Haut* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948).

⁴⁸ I am indebted to Michael Holland for clarifying this point to me in email discussion over a draft of this essay.

⁴⁹ See Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, xii.

⁵⁰ See Bernard-Henri Lévi, *Adventures on the Freedom Road: The French Intellectuals in the Twentieth Century*, trans. and ed. Richard Veasey (London: The Harvill Press, 1995), 318.

heavily on the French translation of Hermann Langbein's documentary study of life and death in the camps, *Menschen in Auschwitz* (1972).⁵¹

More than Langbein's book, however, it is Robert Antelme's testimony to life in concentration camps, *L'Espèce humaine* (1957), which guides Blanchot in his remarks on the Shoah and the Outside.⁵² Antelme was a political *déporté* and his was not a Jewish experience of the camps — there were no gas chambers at Buchenwald or Gandersheim — and this is important, as we shall see. We need to remember that in French commentary on the Second World War the word *déporté* can well elide crucial differences between political prisoners and the Jews.⁵³ Antelme's book is nonetheless a searing account of the hunger, fear, powerlessness, degrading labour, sickness, mistreatment, and lack of hope that pervaded all the camps. Different groups populated Auschwitz-Birkenau, and the camp's function changed from its establishment in May 1940 to the first gassings of Jews with Zyklon B in September 1941 to the beginning of the systematic gassings of Jews in June 1942. At first inmates were neglected on purpose and worked until they dropped, then forced labour started, and finally Jews were mostly murdered on arrival. Only ten to fifteen percent of each later shipment of Jews was allowed to work, some in the gas chambers, and these people usually survived a short time at best. Yet we need also to remember two things. First, many Gentiles were also subject to mass murder in the camps: the first such event at Auschwitz was of mental patients, none of whom was Jewish.⁵⁴ And, second, as already noted, there were heroic acts of individual and group resistance in the death camps, and even a few successful escapes: passivity was not the entire story.⁵⁵ Those things said, Blanchot's dialogue on this piercing testimony gives us a clue to why, in his mind, the Shoah and the Outside must be thought together.

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The participants in the eponymous dialogue 'L'Espèce humaine' allow themselves to be guided by the question 'Who is *Autru*?', which, Blanchot quickly says, he associates with Antelme's book. At first the affiliation is surprising, to say the least, since most readers would tend to regard it as pre-eminently Levinas's question, and Levinas has been a tonic presence in *L'Entretien infini* long before Blanchot turns to Antelme. Indeed, Blanchot raises that exact question in one of several dialogues consecrated to *Totalité et infini* (1961). Those dialogues are at once admiring and critical, and it is especially important to see how they serve to refigure the status of the other person with respect to me as Levinas specifies it. For Levinas, the relation between Self and Other is asymmetrical in favour of the other person who speaks to me from on high in the mode of command. 'The Other is not the incarnation of God', he writes, 'but precisely by his face, in which he is disincarnate, is the manifestation of the height in which God is

⁵¹ See Hermann Langbein, *Menschen in Auschwitz* (Vienna: Europaverlag, 1972). Blanchot most likely read the French abbreviation and translation: *Hommes et femmes à Auschwitz*, trans. Denise Meunier, ed. Jacques Branchu (Paris: Fayard, 1975). I shall continue to cite the English translation, *People in Auschwitz*.

⁵² Perhaps the guidance goes in both directions; it is worth noting that Blanchot places 'Être Juif' directly before his consideration of Antelme in *L'Entretien infini* and that he gives a common title to the two pieces.

⁵³ See LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 158.

⁵⁴ See Ber Mark, *The Scrolls of Auschwitz* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1985), 4.

⁵⁵ See Mark, *The Scrolls of Auschwitz*, *passim*. It should be added that some inmates committed suicide.

revealed.'⁵⁶ And it must be noted right away that the deity Levinas has in mind here is conceived by way of goodness, not being; the ontological or metaphysical nature of God is bracketed.

Early on, one of the participants in Blanchot's dialogue 'Connaissance de l'inconnu' observes, 'Let us leave aside God [*Laissons Dieu de côté*] — the name is too imposing.'⁵⁷ Yet later in the same dialogue the deity returns when one of the participants recalls Levinas saying, 'All true discourse... is a discourse with God, not a conversation held between equals', which is explicated as follows: 'This speech of eminence, which speaks to me from very far away, from very high above (or very far below), is the speech of someone who does not speak with me on an equal footing and such that it is not possible for me to address myself to *autrui* as though he were another *Myself*.'⁵⁸ The participant goes on to worry whether this speech could be no more than 'tranquil humanist and Socratic speech', and has reservations about the French philosopher's reliance on oral communication. Is it no more than what Socrates prizes in *Phaedrus* 274b-277a, the passage where he condemns writing? Does it not have the irruptive force that Blanchot ascribes to 'plural speech'?

A later dialogue, one more distantly tuned to Levinas' *Totalité et infini*, 'Le rapport du troisième genre', returns to consider the way in which *Autrui* impinges on me. 'True strangeness, if it comes to me from man, comes to me from this Other that man would be.'⁵⁹ Later, one of the participants clarifies this strangeness: 'An experience in which the Other, *the Outside itself* [le Dehors même], exceeding any positive or any negative term, is the "presence" that does not refer back to the One, and the exigency of a relation of discontinuity where unity is not implied [my emphasis].'⁶⁰ By this stage Blanchot has pushed Levinas's sense of the other person quite beyond his friend's chosen bounds. This happens in two stages or perhaps three, if one considers that Blanchot and Levinas begin from different points. For Levinas figures the ethical relation in general whereas Blanchot treats it as arising from 'being Jewish' and that situation — for Blanchot a moral state — being generalized over time.⁶¹ First, Blanchot revises the asymmetry between the other person and myself on which Levinas insists. For I am the other of the other person, he insists, thereby stepping away from the intimate phenomenological theatre to adopt a third-person perspective. Yet this is not a dialectical move that flattens moral height and that re-establishes as it were a Euclidean plane as the ground of moral life, a ground on which ethics presumes a *habitus* for virtue deep inside the self or a moral or political contract forged in an historical present whether past, present or to come. In preference, we should speak of a 'double dissymmetry', he writes, 'a double discontinuity, as though the empty space between the one and the other were not homogenous but polarized: as though this space constituted a non-isomorphic field bearing a double distortion, at once infinitely negative and infinitely positive, and such that one should call it neutral if it is well understood that the neutral does not annul, does not neutralize this double-signed

⁵⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 79.

⁵⁷ Blanchot, 'Knowledge of the Unknown', *The Infinite Conversation*, 50.

⁵⁸ Blanchot, 'Knowledge of the Unknown', 56.

⁵⁹ Blanchot, 'The Relation of the Third Kind: *Man without horizon*', *The Infinite Conversation*, 69.

⁶⁰ Blanchot, 'The Relation of the Third Kind', 71.

⁶¹ See Blanchot, 'Being Jewish' and 'Peace, Peace to the Far and to the Near', trans. Leslie Hill, *Paragraph* 30.3 (2007): 28-33.

infinity, but bears it in the way of an enigma.’⁶² Of course, in revising asymmetry to double dissymmetry Blanchot is able to remove God from the scene of ethics, at least the God who comes to mind for Levinas.

The second stage of recasting Levinasian ethics consists of rethinking the scope of the *il y a*, ‘this impersonal, anonymous, yet inextinguishable “consummation” of being, which murmurs in the depths of nothingness itself.’⁶³ As Blanchot acknowledges, the *il y a* is close to the Outside, even to the point of being a synonym for it at times.⁶⁴ Yet for Levinas the *il y a* needs to be overcome for moral life to commence. As he says, ‘[c]onsciousness is a rupture of the anonymous vigilance of the *there is*; it is already hypostasis; it refers to a situation where an existent is put in touch with its existing.’⁶⁵ Not so for Blanchot, since, as we have seen, it is precisely this ‘anonymous vigilance’ that detaches consciousness from selfhood; and ethics for him turns on the approach of the Outside in the very speech of the other person. With each new person’s speech it comes, and this is in large part what justifies the language of return. More, since the Outside hollows out the interiority that has marked individuality, at least in modern times, ethics of the moral agent is itself of secondary value. ‘If the question “Who is *autrui*?” has no direct meaning, it is because it must be replaced by another: “What of the human ‘community’, when it must respond to this relation of strangeness between man and man — a relation without common measure, an exorbitant relation — that the experience of language leads one to sense?’⁶⁶

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What might seem to be a digression concerning Blanchot’s reworking of ethics according to Levinas is in fact merely an attempt to identify a connection between the Outside and the Shoah as economically as possible. For while Blanchot is almost exclusively an essayist in his critical work two of his books are very carefully revised to make arguments over varied and undulating territory. *L’Espace littéraire* is one and *L’Entretien infini* is another. In the latter work Blanchot carefully prepares what to his mind is the proper configuration of the Outside and community in his engagement with *Totalité et infini* in part one, ‘La parole plurielle’, and then draws on it in ‘L’Indestructible’ in part two, ‘L’Expérience-Limite’. It is there that the question ‘Who is “*Autrui*”?’ is detached from Levinas and re-assigned to Antelme in the context of dying and death in the camps. The axial claim in that essay is announced at the end of the opening paragraph: ‘In affliction we approach the limit where, deprived of the power to say “I”, deprived also of the world, we would be nothing other than the Other that we are not.’⁶⁷ It will be noted right away that Blanchot now specifies the Outside

⁶² Blanchot, ‘The Relation of the Third Kind’, 71.

⁶³ Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988), 57.

⁶⁴ One unnamed participant in a fragmentary dialogue observes of ‘(A Primal Scene?)’, ‘*For my part, I hear the inevitability of there is [il y a], which being and nothing roll like a great wave, unfurling it and folding it back under, inscribing and effacing it, to the rhythm of the nameless rustling*’, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 116.

⁶⁵ Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 31. Also see his *Existence and Existents*, ch. 4.

⁶⁶ Blanchot, ‘The Relation of the Third Kind’, 71.

⁶⁷ Blanchot, ‘Humankind’, 130.

differently. Rather than speaking of a passage from *je* to *il*, and the otherness of the *il*, he directly evokes a movement from *je* to *Autre*.⁶⁸

We need to remember that 'L'Espèce humaine' is a dialogue, not an essay, and so we must be circumspect about assigning particular remarks to the Blanchot who signs the whole. Yet the thesis that Antelme and those with him in Buchenwald and Gandersheim lost the power to say 'I' and in effect assumed the role of the other person, the one from whom the strangeness of the Outside comes, is accepted by both participants. Those who are reduced to eating scraps in order to survive nonetheless retain an ego, one speaker admits, yet we are told that it is 'an *egoism without ego*', an attachment to life that has become impersonal and 'in some sense neutral.'⁶⁹ The other speaker then insists that this bare existence intent only on survival does not amount to any form of personal sovereignty. 'When, therefore, my relation with myself makes me the absolutely Other [*l'Autre*] whose presence puts the power of the Powerful radically into question, this movement still signifies only the failure of power — not "my" victory, still less "my" salvation.'⁷⁰ Only in this state of passivity, this situation in which one's 'I' has become a 'he' or a 'she' or even an 'it', can one 'receive the unknown and the foreign, receive them in the justice of a true *speech*.'⁷¹ It is this speech that comes from the Outside, and in saying so the speaker utters a belief in precisely the sense that Nietzsche specifies.

Yet Blanchot realizes that even in somewhere as horrid as Buchenwald or Gandersheim elements of society can re-establish themselves:

Among those who were deported [*les déportés*] there were doubtless relations that allowed them to reestablish an appearance of society, that therefore allowed each one the occasion to feel himself or herself momentarily a self vis-à-vis someone in particular, or even to maintain a semblance of force in confronting those who were the Powerful (if only because the political struggle continued in the rest of the world and was preparing a new day). Had it been otherwise, everything would have immediately given way to a death without end. But what in this situation remains essential, its truth, is the following: the camp confined no more than a bondless entanglement of Others [*hommes Autres*], a magma of the other [*autrui*] face to face with the force of a Self that kills, and that represents nothing but the untiring power to kill.⁷²

Perhaps too little is said here, for we know that in both sorts of camps hierarchies were quickly formed, even if they varied with the shifting populations of the camps: Germans and Austrian criminals were at the top, Jews and Gypsies were far beneath, and the *Muselmänner* drifted along at the very bottom. And perhaps too much is also said, for we know that those interred in the camps did not tend to group together as one against the SS but that some prisoners had no choice but to co-operate with the SS in order to survive, that certain prisoners, those considered 'Aryan', were rewarded with 'bonus slips' (which could be cashed in at the Auschwitz brothel), and that there was much inter-racial and inter-national conflict and even expressions of hatred among inmates.⁷³

⁶⁸ On the relation between the *il* and *autre*, see *The Step Not Beyond*, 5, 39.

⁶⁹ Blanchot, 'Humankind', 133.

⁷⁰ Blanchot, 'Humankind', 133.

⁷¹ Blanchot, 'Humankind', 134.

⁷² Blanchot, 'Humankind', 134.

⁷³ See Langbein, *People in Auschwitz*, 25, 402-13. Also see Robert Sommer, 'Sexual Exploitation of Women in Nazi Concentration Camp Brothels', *Sexual Violence against Women during the Holocaust*, ed. Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2010), 45-60.

And we should be wary about thinking of the SS as a lump, for there are occasional differences that need to be granted, for example, between those in the Political Department and some of those who served as sentries. The situation in even the extermination camps was not simply that of prisoners against the SS; the field of social tensions, even social violence, was far more complex.

We should test Blanchot's reading of Antelme against what Antelme himself writes in *L'Espèce humaine*. Here is one passage early on in the work about being summoned to a role call at Gandersheim:

A *Lagerschutz* calls out the names, butchering them. In among them, amidst Polish and Russian names, is my name. Laughter when my name is called, and I reply 'Present'. It sounded outlandish in my ear; but I'd recognized it. And so for one brief instant I had been directly designated here, I and no other had been addressed, I had been specially solicited — I, myself, irreplaceable! [*on m'a sollicité spécialement, moi, irremplaçable!*] And there I was. Someone had turned up to say yes to this sound, which was at least as much my name as I was myself, in this place. And you had to say yes in order to return into the night, into the stone that bore the nameless face. Had I said nothing, they would have hunted for me [...]. Then, having found me, the SS would have worked me over so as to make it clear to me that here being me really meant being me, and so as I'd have the logic of it good and straight in my head: that, around here, I was damned well I, and that this nothing that bore the name that had been read out was damned well me [*que moi c'était bien moi et que c'était bien moi ce rien qui portait ce nom qu'on avait lu*].⁷⁴

Antelme's experience is of having lost power associated with selfhood and individuality and then, tragi-comically, having to claim it in a place where it can play no positive role. Yet, in his mind at least, the SS wish not simply to extinguish his sense of self but to insist on it, so that it is regarded as a burden to him. Doubtless one aspect of their cruelty is in letting that sense of singularity fade only to retrieve it as something undesirable in any case. Later on at Gandersheim the sense of losing one's individuality intensifies as its loss is projected into the future:

We are being transformed. Our faces and bodies are going downhill, there's no more telling the handsome from the ugly. In three months' time we'll be more different still, we'll be even less distinguishable from one another. Yet each of us will continue, in a vague way, to maintain the idea of his own singularity.⁷⁵

This is not quite 'the impossible experience of being for himself or herself the "other" [*autrui*]' that Blanchot evokes, for the experience seems to be of both the impossible and the possible.⁷⁶ People barely survive in the camp, to be sure, but each person tries to grasp hold of his or her singularity right to the end. One can look also to Primo Levi's eloquent testimony about the same thing for support.⁷⁷

For the sake of argument, let us assume that Blanchot is largely right, that those in the concentration camps existed much as is evoked in the dialogue, and perhaps we might also grant him that this extreme situation illuminates something essential about the human condition, that it enables us to understand better what is at issue when 'two

⁷⁴ Robert Antelme, *The Human Race*, trans. Jeffrey Haight and Annie Mahler (Marlboro: The Marlboro Press, 1992), 21.

⁷⁵ Antelme, *The Human Race*, 87.

⁷⁶ Blanchot, 'Humankind', 135.

⁷⁷ See Primo Levi, *If This is a Man* bound with *The Truce*, trans. Stuart Woolf, intro. Paul Bailey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), esp. ch. 11

individuals approach one another.’⁷⁸ Even if we were to accept all this, however, we would surely still admit two pressing distinctions. The first is between quotidian life and life in the camps. For the person on the street, the man or woman in the midst of everyday life, one has already passed from the first to the third person, as Blanchot sees things. ‘Day-to-day indifference is situation on a level at which the question of value is not posed’, he says, and immediately evokes the Outside. ‘There is [*il y a*] the everyday (without subject, without object), and while there is, the everyday “he” does not have to be of account; if value nonetheless claims to step in, then “he” [or “it”, *il*] is worth “nothing” and “nothing” is worth anything through contact with him.’⁷⁹ Yet even if everyday life is neutral, in Blanchot’s sense, it is qualitatively distinct from the supposed neutrality of life in a concentration camp. Second, it is equally important to separate the two sorts of camp. Auschwitz is a difficult case because of its growing complexity and changing functions over the years of the war; it started as a concentration camp and then became an extermination camp; it was very large, not one camp but three interrelated institutions, and the main one, which had the steadiest population, had 18 437 prisoners at the start of 1944 and 14 386 by the middle of the same year; and when the Russians came in January 1945 they liberated some 60 000 men, women and children.⁸⁰

Given the size of Auschwitz I, it was possible for many there to experience the repetitive, dehumanizing existence that Antelme describes so memorably, to pass, if you like, from experience, normal or abnormal, to an entirely other experience. Yet it must be stated clearly that as the war developed the Jews who arrived at Auschwitz, sometimes after long train rides in appalling conditions, were quickly selected for the gas chambers. Counting only French Jews who were sent to Auschwitz between mid-1942 and mid-1944, about 78.5% were chosen for immediate annihilation directly at the ramp where the train stopped.⁸¹ Those who had to strip naked and run to the chambers did not, I dare say, experience themselves as having become other than themselves. Rather, they screamed and clambered over one another, each asserting his or her ‘I’, many banging against the locked door in the thin hope of breaking it down; some fought as best they could at the very entrance to the gas chamber in order to hang on to life — life in the first person — at any cost. It is worth hearing the testimony of Zalman Loewenthal, an inmate whose testimony about Auschwitz was hidden in a jar that he buried near the crematorium. Blanchot quotes some impressive words by him that come after a harrowing account of what life was like in Auschwitz — ‘The truth as it really exists is immeasurably more tragic and terrible’⁸² — but he does not quote these earlier sentences:

And our intelligence is subconsciously influenced by the wonderful will to live, by the impulse to remain alive; you try to convince yourself, as if you do not care about your own life, but want only the general good, to go through with all of this for this and that cause, for this and that reason; you find hundreds of excuses, but the truth is that you want to live at any price. You desire to live, because you are alive, because the whole world continues

⁷⁸ Blanchot, ‘Humankind’, 135.

⁷⁹ Blanchot, ‘Everyday Speech’, 245.

⁸⁰ See Langbein, *People in Auschwitz*, 53, 51.

⁸¹ See Langbein, *People in Auschwitz*, 58.

⁸² Zalman Loewenthal, ‘Writings’, *The Scrolls of Auschwitz*, 240.

to live, and everything that is pleasant, everything to which you are attached, is first and foremost attached to life itself.⁸³

Loewenthal, a Polish Jew, was forced on pain of death to work in the *Sonderkommando*, in the gas chambers at Auschwitz, and one might presume that the weight of his experience of daily horror informs his claim, 'you want to live at any price', which means one lives with the desire to say 'I'.

*

The approach of the Outside, what Blanchot calls 'disaster', is presented to us in several registers. In intransitive writing, one passes, we are told, from the first to the third person: I become other than myself, and this would seem to occur by dint of yielding to the non-world of image that is inseparable from art. Blanchot's testimony to this situation is not quite unique, but it seems to be restricted to avant-garde writing of the sort that he admires from the Jena Romantics to Louis-René des Fôrets. One apprehends the Outside, also, it seems, in suffering and in thought, while in everyday life one also yields to life in the third-person, although, to be sure, one can snap back into one's 'I' at any moment. More than anyone else, it is Foucault who draws on disaster, as Blanchot conceives it, as indicating the erasure of the Classical and Renaissance figures of 'man', and perhaps it will be seen as marking the beginning of a new understanding of the human being when the *cogito* and transcendental unity of apperception have long since frayed as viable concepts in a philosophical anthropology.⁸⁴ Perhaps too this new understanding of the human comes into focus most clearly in extreme situations, far from the reassurance of humanist social and moral norms, and Antelme's *L'Espèce humaine* is one place where we see the 'I' flicker, even if Blanchot perhaps pushes us to think that it goes out when Antelme actually cups his hand around the flame to keep it alight.

Yet the extermination camps of the Shoah are different; they bespeak human wickedness at its most overt and most routinized, they point us to men, women and children who, in the last years of the war, were mostly murdered upon arrival at a camp and who were not passive souls ranged against killers who clung to selfhood and power. Everyday life for the inmates on the *Sonderkommando* was not the same as quotidian life for those back in Paris; and suffering for those imprisoned in the extermination camps was extreme, not a phantom of suffering. The Shoah calls for a differentiated analysis, and fragmentary writing does not lend itself to such a thing. If there is 'writing of disaster' directly to do with the Shoah, it is in those texts known as the 'scrolls of Auschwitz', and the testimonies of survivors such as Jean Améry, Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel and the script of *Shoah*.⁸⁵ In these documents one does not find much testimony of neutral existence, either in writing or in a vision of a society to come, but the persistence of the desire to say 'I'. It is true that, for Blanchot, the West failed for over a century to think through the consequences of its own end (and he includes his younger self in this criticism), and this thoughtlessness about the loss of the self, the loss of

⁸³ Loewenthal, 'Writings', *The Scrolls of Auschwitz*, 221.

⁸⁴ See Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 387.

⁸⁵ See Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor of Auschwitz on its Realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980) and Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel, new pref. Elie Wiesel, foreword Françoise Mauriac (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006).

transcendence, and the loss of assured truth, created a void in which the Shoah could occur. The proper response to this thoughtlessness today is the writing of disaster, he contends, for only such disorienting writing can possibly deflect something as absolutely horrid as the Shoah from ever happening again. Perhaps, if writing is stronger than human evil; otherwise, it is no more than an oblique cry of 'Never again!' Yet Blanchot's hope is stronger: the slide from God, the One, the Self, Truth, and so on, to a form of selfhood that is not centred on the power to say 'I', to a way of being in relation one with another that is 'anonymous, distracted, deferred, and dispersed', may well change humankind.⁸⁶ Maybe there is no more that an intellectual can do as intellectual. For a reader of *L'Écriture du désastre*, however, one would be well advised not to see there a convergence of the Outside and the Shoah but rather a diagnosis of the intellectual's responsibility to think disaster.

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⁸⁶ See Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, xii.

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'Evenimentul absolut al istoriei': Holocaustul și spațiul exterior

Articolul analizează cele două tipuri de dezastru din opera lui Maurice Blanchot intitulată *L'Écriture du désastre* (1980): Holocaustul și abordarea Exteriorității. Articolul examinează expunerea suferinței și face referire la rolul pe care opera lui Robert Antelme, *L'Espece humaine* (1947), îl joacă în *L'Écriture du désastre*. Articolul detaliază diferențele dintre lagărele de concentrare și lagărele de exterminare și pune întrebarea dacă scrierea fragmentară este capabilă să răspundă ororilor Holocaustului într-o manieră adecvată.