Hearing the Disaster – On the Sonority of Maurice Blanchot’s Writing

Ann Smock ascribes the difficulty she had in translating Maurice Blanchot’s *The Writing of the Disaster* to the rhythm created by the words themselves, the sonority of Blanchot’s writing.[[1]](#footnote-1) And, indeed, it seems that Blanchot, perhaps more in this work than in any other, occupies himself with sounds, as this sonority plays an important part in his philosophy of language, his very writing being sonorous.

While much has been written about the visual aspect in Blanchot’s writing,[[2]](#footnote-2) in this brief piece, I would like to focus on the auditory, on the sonority of his works. I would like to demonstrate that this sonority can be found at the very foundation of Blanchot’s language, functioning as its source. The sounds grant the disaster presence, make it audible, and Blanchot demands that we hear them.

However, since spoken language, with its empty concepts, does not allow the disaster to be heard—Blanchot asserts that the “echo of a language”[[3]](#footnote-3) cannot be heard in it—he chooses to make it audible through his writing. He says, “To write is to make oneself the echo of that which cannot cease speaking.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Writing makes the echoes possible. It successfully allows readers to pay attention to the disaster, and it is this writing, which is written—as it were—by the disaster itself, that is broken, indistinct, fragmentary, truncated, and sonorous. It disturbs the order of things, and in so doing allows attention to be turned to the other and to the disaster.

The primary source that I will use in this paper is Blanchot’s 1980 book, *The Writing of the Disaster*. His other works, including *The Space of Literature*, *Death Sentence*, *Thomas the Obscure*, and *The Infinite Conversation* will also help us elucidate the role and place sonority plays in his writings. While Blanchot does not refer to music often, I believe these references are both crucial and relevant to understanding his concept of sonority, so I will also make use of them, especially of his article entitled *Ars Nova*, in which he defends Arnold Schönberg’s atonal music.

**On the Elusiveness of the Disaster and Language which is not Disastrous Enough**

Even though disaster has a name, it does not reveal itself through language, says Blanchot.[[5]](#footnote-5) Elsewhere he argues that when we speak about the word ‘disaster’ we feel that it misses the mark.[[6]](#footnote-6)

1. Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, Trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: U of Nebraska, 1995), p. vii. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Many studies on this topic have been published over the last few years, including J. Fort, “The Look of Nothingness: Blanchot and the Image” (2018); M. Blanchot, “’The Dictatorship of the Eye’: Henri Lefebvre on Vision, Space and Modernity” (2017); A. Cools, “Blanchot’s Windows” (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *The Writing of the Disaster*, 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, Trans. Ann Smock (London [sic?]: U of Nebraska, 1982), 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *The Writing of the Disaster*, 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)