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 played by sonority 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)

The gap between the disaster and its nominal use can be explained in two interconnected and interwoven ways. The first is the elusiveness of the disaster itself. The disaster Blanchot is discussing is one that cannot be pointed out or experienced, and, therefore, the “I” does not feel threatened by it. [[7]](#footnote-7) We cannot situate it at a certain point of time in the future because it has always already been and is always already present.[[8]](#footnote-8) It destroys everything, and simultaneously leaves everything whole.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Therefore, Blanchot’s disaster is different from the disaster we are used to. It is not a specific event with a beginning, a middle, and an end, but rather a cloud that constantly envelopes us, taking place in the background of our lives. And precisely here, asserts Blanchot, are the disasters concealed. The inherent disasterlessness and the fact that we cannot say “here is the disaster,” “the disaster is over,” or “we have overcome the disaster” is what turns them into this. Therefore, it makes sense to assert that the word “disaster” misses the mark. It simply cannot delimit the disaster, to situate and attach it to a singular point in time. Following in Derrida’s footsteps, Blanchot asserts that “The disaster is the improperness of its name and the disappearance of the proper name.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Taking an even broader approach, Blanchot also argues that words themselves fail to match reality. Words cannot be kneaded into one simple sentence,[[11]](#footnote-11) he said, and their use “turns language away from itself.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Reason, he asserts, strives to partition reality into systems, searching for positive knowledge to grasp and respond to,[[13]](#footnote-13) so that we must say everything, by speaking without surcease.[[14]](#footnote-14) However, in practice, language theories are useless, and we should forget this knowledge. Words exchange their meanings with one another other constantly,[[15]](#footnote-15) and, therefore, there is no point in endowing things with unambiguous and permanent names.

Blanchot does not even stop there, however, he takes another step forward stating that not only do words fail to match reality but there is also a danger in the way we use words today. The danger, he explains, is the possibility that we will be unable to hear the “’be silent’ addressed to those who have known only partially, or from a distance the interruption of history.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Elsewhere he claims that the disaster leads to the fact that the people who have been exterminated (without being exterminated) are silenced, and if they speak, it is always with the voice of the Other which blames them, interrogates them and “obliges them to answer for a silent affliction which they bear without awareness.”[[17]](#footnote-17) These quotes might lead us to conclude that Blanchot reckons that the discourse structures a relationship based on power between those who have been exterminated and silenced and those who have only experienced the disruptions of history from afar. However, I believe that Blanchot would reject this claim. The disaster envelopes all of us, and “the exterminated people” and the “silenced” are included in ‘all of us,’ some more and some less. The disaster, its elusiveness, and the fact that it cannot be situated and pointed to leads us to believe that the disruptions are seemingly irrelevant to us, that they give us a miss, when in fact they are eternally present in every one of our backgrounds. Either way, Blanchot charges us to hear the disruptions, to hear the disaster—and not just from afar—and to silence both the unceasing talk and those “useless theories.”

**Sonority as the Prelinguistic Basis for Language – Intentionalessness and Anonymity**

So, how does Blanchot suggest we speak? First of all, he asks us to forego using words in their familiar way, employing them instead in the negative,[[18]](#footnote-18) in a manner that forces us to renounce the customary channels and the authority that is manifest in knowledge. He asks that we forego language that “knows” and “appropriates.” Only by losing what we have to say—in the context of the disaster— do we speak, says Blanchot.[[19]](#footnote-19) He proposes that we speak of subjectivity devoid of the subject and about the wounded place, the body that has already died, that of which no one can say “my body.”[[20]](#footnote-20) He wishes to present us with a question, instead of an exclamation mark, reminding us in this case of Socrates who “interrupts himself without cease.”[[21]](#footnote-21) In his *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot makes a similar appeal, asking us to use “indirect” language because, in his opinion, this form of speech reveals the vagueness that precedes clarity.[[22]](#footnote-22) Near the end of the book, he adds that ambiguity is a positive value,[[23]](#footnote-23) from which we can learn that, in his opinion, ambiguous language is preferable to clear language.

Blanchot also notes that silence can take the place of speech which appropriates and distances language from itself. Thus, Blanchot writes that silence exists outside of language and is distinct from it, [[24]](#footnote-24) and elsewhere he writes that in every utterance, we are silent.[[25]](#footnote-25) One of the arguments that Blanchot makes about silence seems of particular interest and relevance to this paper: silence is linked to a voiceless cry, “which is addressed to no one and which no one receives.”[[26]](#footnote-26) This line of thought implies that the absence of an utterance, the silence, allows for another type of communication to arise, a nonverbal communication, in this case the cry. However I believe that Blanchot is far more interested in proposing that language should take a crucial step backwards, to its sonorous form, rather than proposing language in which error speaks or in proposing silence. As he writes, “a word that is almost deprived of meaning is noisy,”[[27]](#footnote-27) and this I believe is what he means when he talks about stripping language of its meaning, reducing it to a prelinguistic state of sounds, of noise that refuses to locate the meaning of the word. It seems to me that sonority is foundational for Blanchot (albeit a temporary and shaky foundation). Sonority is that which “draws language close to itself.” Language that has its meaning or message extracted from it becomes matter, music, pure sounds, tones, rhythm. Blanchot, as mentioned above, notes the cry and declares that it is that which is found “beneath the word,”[[28]](#footnote-28) and elsewhere he writes that the cry “exceeds all language” and “does not simply reduce to nonsense.”[[29]](#footnote-29) The cry repeats throughout Blanchot’s works, for instance, in Anne’s cry in *Thomas the Obscure*.[[30]](#footnote-30)

However, in addition to the bitter cry Blanchot recalls several additional sounds, among them the the yell or the scream, the call, the lament, the murmur, the voice and its echoing, and in a few places, laughter and prayer. In *The Infinite Conversation,* Blanchot discusses the murmur which relinquishes its place to the echoing in which the murmur grows, and which speaks from within the murmur while being “entirely external”[[31]](#footnote-31) to it. Elsewhere he writes about “the voice that exists behind the words,” that “which is neither heard nor speaks.”[[32]](#footnote-32) In *The Writing of the Disaster*, he describes murmuring as “not language, but enchantment,”[[33]](#footnote-33) and in *The Space of Literature*, he describes this as the murmuring which language develops into, speech that is described as profound and flowing with abundance but also empty.[[34]](#footnote-34) The description of the “empty abundance” that exists behind the words repeats itself in many of the scenes in *The Verdict of Death* wherein Blanchot charges the reader to hear the voice of the night, or in *Thomas the Obscure* where he addresses the boundary between silence and sound and the acoustics of death. The sounds in these works are both heard and unheard; they penetrate and disrupt the never-ending discourse that does not allow us to hear the command—“Be silent.” The sounds disrupt history, allowing us to turn our attention to the disaster, to its disasterlessness. In her translation of *The Space of Literature*, Smock declares that art is a “murmur, the source of creativity,”[[35]](#footnote-35) and, in so doing, she also stresses the fact that sonority is not only the source of language but also the source of creativity.[[36]](#footnote-36)

It even seems that the sounds in some way undermine the power of sight, for in each of those stories the ear is called upon to question the outsized emphasis granted the eyes. In one of the passages in *The Infinite Conversation* Blanchot even notes that “speaking is not seeing,” and it seems like he is contrasting the senses of sight and hearing. He claims that for sight “speech is war and madness.”[[37]](#footnote-37) Likewise he links speech with forgetfulness when he writes that seeing means forgetting to speak, and speaking means drawing upon an inexhaustible forgetfulness.[[38]](#footnote-38) In other words, while the eye remembers, photographs and affixes, speech appropriates far less.

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 (Lincoln/London: U of Nebraska, 1982), 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *The Writing of the Disaster*, 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 1, 36, 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *The Writing of the Disaster*, 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, Trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1993), 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *The Writing of the Disaster*, 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Maurice Blanchot, *Thomas the Obscure*, Trans. Robert Lamberton (NY: Station Hill, 1999), 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. *The Infinite Conversation*, 321. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., 329. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. *The Writing of the Disaster*, 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, Trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln/London: U of Nebraska, 1982), 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. *The Space of Literature*, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Notwithstanding their many differences, perhaps it is appropriate to mention Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem who emphasized language’s sonorous side and believed that it was this sonorousness that allowed language to manifest truth. These two authors, in contrast to Blanchot, also addressed the revelatory aspect of language and sought to demonstrate its presence in language’s auditory, musical, and sensual aspects and in its ability to express ‘internal’ and potential meaning via its tones, echoing, and rhythms. Language, according to Benjamin, the master of language, is the reincarnation of the creative word of God, the absolute, which as a linguistic force shapes and instantiates via sound. See, for example, Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and the Language of Man,” 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. *The Infinite Conversation*, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid., 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)