

The Catastrophic Imperative: Subjectivity, Time and Memory in Contemporary Thought

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Introduction

‘It affected him as the sequel of something of which he had lost the beginning’ -- Henry James, ‘The Beast in the Jungle’¹

Henry James’s much discussed tale ‘The Beast in the Jungle’ relates the story of John Marcher’s life-long wait for an experience that he believes is uniquely destined for him. His friend, May Bartram, describes it as a sense of impending catastrophe, a sense of ‘being kept for something rare and strange, possibly prodigious and terrible, that was sooner or later to happen’ (James, p. 744). The two friends spend their whole lives in anticipation of this enormous event, imagining the possible shapes this ‘ignominy’ or ‘monstrosity’ might take, which Marcher names his Beast in the Jungle. It is only at the end of the tale, following May’s untimely death, that Marcher finally realizes the truth of his life: by waiting for the catastrophe, he has all along been living the catastrophe itself, namely, the catastrophe of being the man to whom nothing will ever happen.

Such a sudden shift in perspective -- the realization that one ‘is’ precisely what one is waiting for (or waiting to become) -- recalls what Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* calls the ‘cunning of reason.’ In the guise of something to be awaited, the event is already occurring unseen and unremarked

by conscious reason. Believing that the 'Beast' will spring upon him from the outside, Marcher is unable to perceive that it has already sprung, and is eviscerating his life from within. James's historical insight is thus fully modern: insofar as we imagine we stand somehow outside the grander forces that are shaping the world, we are blind to precisely how far we are implicated in them or, to put it in more conventional Kantian terms, our perceptual apparatus determines what we are able to 'see.' If James's insight speaks particularly eloquently to us today, it is because we find ourselves in multiple different ways attending our own 'Beast in the Jungle,' whether in the form of a global version of the catastrophic conflagration currently engulfing the Middle East, in the cataclysmic environmental destruction and mass starvation predicted as a consequence of human-induced climate change, or in the shape of the new devastating illnesses that are being spawned by industrialized farming practices, pollution, technological 'advances' such as cloning, and so on. As these examples from our contemporary catastrophic horizon cannot help but bring home to us, although one customarily thinks of catastrophe as something massive that strikes us from the outside in typically spectacular, unpredictable 'natural' events, today we are increasingly being forced to face up to the extent to which we (both individually and collectively) bear a certain responsibility for them -- particularly to the extent that we, like Marcher, position ourselves subjectively as passively 'awaiting' them.

In the aggressively resurgent theoteological routines that are upon us now, such waiting has always had its place as the middle of the story whose end is in its beginning: eschatology locates its subjects in the meantime of the penultimate and transmutes impending catastrophe into the rapture of revelation that always already legitimizes the mean as a means to itself. The catastrophe is already

there, we are only waiting for it to occur. Which is to say that occurrence itself, a rupture in the real, is no longer material and therefore need not even take place. Such is the logic of catastrophism, the fully-fledged ideological levelling of the contradictions of the catastrophic in which rapture replaces responsibility to, and for, rupture. Catastrophism is the denial of catastrophe as the original downturn to death effected by the trace instituting the time of performative response. It inverts the downturn to an upbeat banging away till constative Kingdom come. All will be revealed. All writing erased.

It is thus all the more urgent to state today that the routines of theory require resistance to theodicy. Suspending theoteleology, theory demands the assumption of at least a heightened sensitivity to one's responsibility, or 'subjective implication' as we propose to call it, in immense or catastrophic events. The recent focus on trauma is perhaps the most visible performance of such sensitivity in contemporary theory. As is well known, trauma studies are concerned with the way certain inassimilable events nevertheless manage to enter and inscribe themselves on an individual's consciousness. To account for this process, trauma theory elaborates a counter-logical or at least a-chronological temporality that recalls that of James's tale. In a move that parallels the belatedness of Marcher's realization, theorists of trauma explain that it is only once the event has been inserted into a meaningful context or 'Symbolic' system that it takes on its proper resonance as 'traumatic.' As an 'unclaimed experience,' Cathy Caruth reminds us, the traumatic event can never be experienced as such, but must always be re-constructed after the fact.² To qualify as a trauma, the event must be subjectivized: retroactively inserted into a narrative and imbued with a specific representational and affective character. All traumatic events are thus literally 'post-traumatic.' In this aspect, they recall the

backward-facing orientation of Walter Benjamin's Angel of History: traumatic events are only ever lived in the mode of 'after.' Yet as the contributors to this volume indicate, the imperative to think subjectivity, memory and time as interrelated/as tied together in a Borromean way will require the resources not just of Benjamin but also Heidegger, at least the Heidegger of 'Hölderlin's Hymn' for whom 'The most violent "catastrophes" in nature and in the cosmos are nothing in the order of *Unheimlichkeit* in comparison with that *Unheimlichkeit* which man is in himself.'³ Marcher's -- and by implication our own -- catastrophic realization will transpire not out of any incapacity to act 'in time' to avoid the cataclysmic future. Indeed, if the ignominious event is inevitable, this will not be because of any 'failure of political will,' as our pundits have already in advance decided, but because we are failing, collectively, to think ourselves as James's Marcher, subjectively the very catastrophe we are awaiting and therefore denying.

The Catastrophic Imperative attempts to think this other, 'subjective' causality of the catastrophe from a non-related temporal horizon. From this perspective, contemporary ethical and political imperatives are enacted not through the preventative self-denials urged by an increasingly despairing left, but as a certain inevitability, as irreducible as it is still unmapped. Evoked by the essays collected here, catastrophe holds us accountable through a 'memory' of the future, that is, through the imperceptible, always contingent ways we as individual and social subjects have already, unconsciously decided it. Far from eliciting strategies for 'changing' the trajectory of this pre-written future, the task for thinking a post-global politics therefore lies, in Jean Dupuy's immortal words, in inscribing the catastrophe 'in a much more radical way.'⁴ The essays collected here suggest what catastrophe might

look like once it has been shorn of its eschatological foundation. Removed from the necessity of delivering anthropological meaning -- of what, in a collective version of Marcher's hubristic delusion, it might mean 'for us' -- catastrophe starts to become accessible as a critical concept for tracking non-linear networks of memory regimes and their orders of reference as they are and have always been lived co-incident with eschatology in 'the mean time.'

J. Hillis Miller's essay, 'Who or What Decides: For Derrida: A Catastrophic Theory of Decision' opens up the terms of the discussion by asking whether decision itself is or can be catastrophic. The critical term derives from Kierkegaard's famous claim in *Fear and Trembling* that the moment of decision is madness.⁵ All decisions rely on a previously given knowledge, but Miller explores the ways decision itself is made in a moment of madness -- at a point where theoretical and historical knowledge inevitably fail. Whether madness or foolishness -- that is to say, immaterial of whether it lacks knowledge, or is supported by existing laws -- decision precludes the supposition of an autonomous or self-conscious ego. Instead, as Miller argues through his explorations of the above mentioned Henry James and Anthony Trollope, decision overcomes us, like a catastrophe, seemingly forcing itself on us from the outside.

The closing sentence of Erik Vogt's essay reiterates Slavoj Žižek's germane question, 'Are we still able to commit the act proper? Which social agent is, on account of its radical dislocation, today able to accomplish it?' The author's query emerges from his careful prior exposition of the apparent total capture of the social that Adorno, Heidegger and Agamben detect in catastrophic thought, troped as instrumental reason, *Gestell*, and sovereign biopolitics, respectively. With Žižek, and

implicitly Lacan, Vogt ventures the thought of the exception not as something external and constitutive of a totality but as something inherent to that totality. Totality, he suggests, is not determined by an exception but rests on an antagonism that is both internal and foundational.

Sjoerd van Tuinen's essay, 'Breath of Relief: Sloterdijk and the Politics of the Intimate,' begins with a catastrophic quotation (in the other, Shakespearean sense suggested by Falstaff, in *Henry IV*, meaning 'behind')⁶ where Peter Sloterdijk flatly states that culture must be thought from its rupture with nomadism, from the moment we become saddled with our own shit (and its smell). This recalls Lacan's famous 'la culture, c'est l'égout.' What should be expelled lies not outside us but is located in 'sphere' in which we live. Both Žižek and Baudrillard have reflected in their own ways on the obscene, particularly in the context of contemporary politics. For these, the obscene is defined by what remains off-stage, the ob-scene, that has no say in (democratic) representation. Analyzing these thinkers' different approaches to the obscene, van Tuinen foregrounds Sloterdijk's call for some fresh air in the form of new psycho-political scenes of communication not exclusively determined by obscene terrorism or a psychoanalytically-inspired passion for the real. Can such a new psycho-political scene be represented? This is the question Justin Clemens poses in his essay. To the different ways 'man' has historically been described, Clemens adds his own Lacanian-inspired definition: 'Man is a swarm animal.' For Clemens, the contemporary social can no longer be conceived as bound by a unifying, representational signifier (traditionally: nation, race, identity, etc.) but as a post-symbolic 'swarm.' Clemens pursues this swarm through an in-depth reading of the Lacanian notion of S1. The homonyms *essun* (S1) and *essaim* (swarm) comprise what Clemens calls a 'punct.' In its various permutations as

swarm and Schwärmerei, this revised S1 hints at the possibility of thinking a non-representational multiplicity whose autotaxic political ramifications remain unpredictable.

Tom Cohen takes these ramifications to their outermost reaches in his close reading of Hitchcock's 'The Birds.' For Cohen, the 'cinematic' marks itself as an historial event that threatens to destroy the ocularcentric program of the human as a construct. Cohen detects in Hitchcock's birds a non-referential force, a nanoswarm he terms a 'bird war,' that brings the twin poles of the program of the visible into violent collision. Cohen's predictions of coming wars of reinscription confront us with the necessity for thinking memory post-globally, that is, as capable of attending to other, non-anthropomorphic temporalities invoked by inscription. Patience Moll's rhetorical reading of the section on physiognomy and craniology from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* suggests one way of seizing upon Cohen's challenge. Moll finds in the transformation of consciousness into spirit the traces of a redoubled *katastrephein*. In this catastrophic downturn, consciousness is confronted with its own materiality in the form of the post-Enlightenment 'pseudosciences' of physiognomy and craniology. Tracing the move from the former to the latter, Moll identifies a shift from the materiality of meaning (the facial expression of a thought) to facing materiality as such -- the skull, or pure 'thing.' Pursuing the catastrophic rhetoric of this turn, Moll argues that the concept of 'action' it produces must be understood in terms of survival; action's imperative is neither moral nor idealistic, but both temporal and material.

In 'Catastrophe, Citationality and the Limits of Responsibility in *Disgrace*,' Gert Buelens argues that J. M. Coetzee's disturbing post-Apartheid novel is structured around catastrophic events

that produce ‘subjects’ through acts of citation and allow injury to set borders to identity. Concentrating on Lucy Lurie’s remarkable response to being raped by a gang of black men (she refuses to prosecute them and decides to become the common-law wife of a member of their extended family), the essay shows how this response must be understood as an act of political performativity that relies on citationality so as to turn the aggressor’s force in a different direction from the intended one. That Lucy makes this choice is linked to her acceptance of her own responsibility for her place in history. Rather than living as a white owner on what contemporary history morally regards as black turf, while citing all the time the behavioural norms of her group in a manner of which she is largely unaware but that is brought home to her in the detail of how the rape takes place, she will henceforth live as a tenant-farmer on land she no longer owns, and will be fully dependent on the protection offered by her black landlord—her new common-law husband. Her responsibility will thus be limited by a wholly new set of norms that she will have to learn to cite correctly. Lucy accepts that she has been part of the problem, and that the only solution for a future South Africa lies in white people’s recognition of the extent to which their identity too must be marked by the cut of history.

Dany Nobus’ essay reaches right into the heart of the volume’s exploration of the intricacies of catastrophic causation. A report by one of the victims of the London bombings of 7 July, 2005 serves as Nobus’ point of departure for a meditation on the status of the victim from the perspective of psychoanalysis. Nobus shows how psychoanalysis opts for the difficult position of neither denying victimhood nor refusing to acknowledge the ways such a position can have a number of uncomfortable -- and discomfoting -- results. For Nobus, the *skandalon* of psychoanalysis -- that man is an animal

marked by a perverse and distorted relation to sexuality -- reminds us of another scandal propounded by psychoanalysis: every trauma conceals an unconscious choice that is as unimaginable as it is unavoidable. In a period when ethics is being reduced to victims' rights, Nobus's is a far from obvious and difficult claim.

In his meditation on Nietzsche Alain Badiou asks: 'Who is Nietzsche?' This is not a biographical question but one which enquires into the relation between philosophy as crime and as proper name. For Badiou, Nietzsche's gesture is both anti-philosophical and arche-political, meaning that Nietzsche offers neither a theory, nor an analysis nor an interpretation of the world but, on the contrary, he changes the world. To claim that one's thought 'breaks the world in two' is not philosophy but antiphilosophy. It is only later that a philosophy capable of thinking Nietzsche's truth comes into play, enabling us to leave Nietzsche behind. In 'Is Pleasure a Rotten Idea?' Aaron Schuster returns to the all-too-hastily answered question of whether it is now time to dispense with the psychoanalytic model in favour of a Deleuzian paradigm that is not obsessed with lack. Classically, pleasure has been conceived as the (fulfillment of a) lack but desire -- Deleuze's preferred alternative -- is witness to an excess. This choice stems from a discussion with Lacan for whom desire also holds a central place, albeit as 'lack.' The author notes that Deleuze's alternative conception of desire posits no mediating Other. Insofar as this is possible within Deleuze's Spinozan system, however, it becomes difficult to conceive of accidents or catastrophes. The philosophy of plenitude and non-limitation is found to have its own problems in conceiving ways of demarcating the excesses of desire.

Regarding the question of where catastrophe occurs, Gil Chaitin claims that, neither rational nor

irrational, Barrès's proto-fascism can be best understood in light of Lacan's notion of 'extimacy.'

Barrès's Novels of National Energy exemplify his neologistic mode of escaping from the polar opposition of the interior and the exterior that so often haunts the discourse of identity at the heart of republican, nationalist and fascist ideology. The text juxtaposes the ethic of acceptance and that of energetic action in the person of the two main protagonists, Roemerspacher and Sturel, a conflict that raged in Barrès's heart as he struggled to come to terms with the event that precipitated his plunge into right-wing nationalism and the forefront of the anti-Dreyfus movement, the death of his father. A denial of death and the consequent nothingness of the self, his nationalist ideology asserts that the core of our inner being is nothing but the sum of our ancestors. As Sturel eventually discovers, we can reconcile determinism and autonomy only by bowing to the internal compulsion of our ancestral identity. On one level, this entails xenophobia and anti-Semitism. Yet the description of the foreign Astiné and the plot of the novel reveal another, 'extimate' appeal to the movement, a covert enjoyment of the sadistic incorporation of the Other within the self. Closing out the volume, in her essay, 'Topography of the Border: Derrida Rewriting Transcendental Aesthetics,' Joanna Hodge presents an incisive analysis of the problems connected with Kant's forms of pure intuition, that is, space and time. Making use of Derrida's analyses in 'Truth and Painting' (1978) and other texts, she amends Kant's transcendental aesthetic with a 'topography of the border.'

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Notes to Introduction

1. Henry James, *Collected Stories*, sel. and ed. by John Bayley, 2 vols. (New York: Knopf, 1999).
2. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).
3. Martin Heidegger, 'Hölderlin's Hymne "Der Ister,"' *Gesamtausgabe*, 53 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1984), p. 94. Cited in Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), p.187n12.
4. Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *Pour un catastrophisme éclairé* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2002), p. 164.
5. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. by Alastair Hannay (New York: Penguin, 2005).
6. William Shakespeare, *King Henry IV, Part Two*, Act II, Scene 1, 26.