

Memento mori, or deflection

Jacques Lezra

Fragonard, on the other hand, retained the idea of death; but he reversed the original moral. He depicted two cupids, probably spirits of departed lovers, clasped in an embrace within a broken sarcophagus while other, smaller cupids flutter about and a friendly genius illumines the scene with the light of a nuptial torch. Here the development has run full cycle. To Guercino's "Even in Arcady, there is death" Fragonard's drawing replies: "Even in death, there may be Arcady."

Panofsky, "Et in Arcadia Ego"

A propos, sais-tu que tu m'as encore sauvé la vie l'autre jour quand d'un mouvement infiniment pardonnant tu as permis que je te dise où est le mal, son retour prévisible toujours, la catastrophe prévenante, appelée, donnée, datée. Elle est lisible sur un calendrier, avec son nom propre, classée, tu entends ce mot, nomenclaturée. Il ne suffisait pas de prévoir ou de prédire ce qui arriverait bien un jour, *forecasting is not enough*, il faudrait penser (qu'est-ce veut dire ici, tu sais, toi?) ce arriverait par le fait ou prévu, une sorte belle apocalypse télescopée, caléidoscopée, à l'instant déclenchée par la précipitation de l'annonce même, consistant justement en cette annonce, la prophétie revenant à elle-même depuis le futur de son propre à-venir. L'apocalypse a lieu au moment où j'écris ceci, mais un présent de ce genre garde avec lui-même une affinité télépathique ou prémonitoire (il se sent à distance et s'avertit de lui-même) qui me sème en route et me fait peur.

Derrida, « Télépathie »

D. reminds me that it's likely, it's almost certain, that it's natural that I'll die before she does—our ages tell on us and on me especially; she's right of course. Does this change how I'm disposed to her? To the world? But I can't imagine it; I can't envision it. She says I should, even that I *must* try to do both. For if I remember that it's natural that I should die, and that I should die first, then what I and we do now will be different; I and we will be more attentive to the world's here-and-now; more caring. The registers of obligation, demand, guilt, and impotence work me.

That's the idea: *memento mori*. It's general, it's traditional, and it forms the basis of European moral culture. But it's an embarrassing formula: remember, it enjoins, that you will die. How can I have a memory of what I can't imagine? Or even a memory of what will come to pass? Perhaps you're asking or demanding that I draw from what I've already seen the image of what will come, and keep that before my eyes, in my imagination. I've seen others die (I saw C. die; and J, many years ago). I'll call that prefigurative torsion of what I've lived a metaphor, since it's *like* what I think will happen, *but* never the same. Or perhaps a catachresis, since whatever in the future that I bend toward my use in the present mismatches, does violence, is improper to

the present. Not only is my death not an event in my life, as Wittgenstein wrote, but the remembrance that there is, there has been, and there will be death in my life is itself *not* a part of my life. Or rather—it's not a part of my life in the way that (say) visiting Antarctica is: I've never been that far South but could go, as I have gone North to Iceland or East to Paris. But there is no "as I have done, or gone" before in the world, when you remind me that it's likely that I will die before you, and demand that I remember that and envision it. No cardinal points help me step closer or farther. I'll need to recall in a different sense, and envision differently than when I imagine a trip to Antarctica.

Here are two things. Imagine the ends of the world, I ask you: the multi-fronted, accelerating apocalypse of climate change; the certainty that the next pandemic, or the next, or the following one, will not respect the habits and immunities we've developed in this confinement or the morbidities and relatively low mortalities of the current SARS-COVID pandemic—but will catastrophically combine the highest rates of transmission with the highest rates of mortality; the renewed threat of nuclear annihilation. The death of the species; the death of all species as we, our species, know them. Am I asking you to imagine traveling to Antarctica, or asking you to envision the world after, or including, your death?

Now envision the world you'd like to have instead of the one we do have—the one headed, apparently ineluctably, toward the apocalypse. Are you a part of the world we'd like to have? What cardinal points orient you toward it—what is it like, what known markers and termini lead you there? You'll immediately object: the end of our world isn't a matter of *natural* necessity; it's our artifact, what we've done and are doing; it could have been prevented, or can yet be. What's to be gained from drawing the ecological end into analogy with my own? In the analogy we lose, certainly, our sense of *ability*, our agency, our how-to. If strategy, project, and intention are conditioned to these, then we'll lose them as well. If we cannot imagine our death or the end of the world, then we have nothing before us *but* our death and the end of the world. Does this entail, does it make possible, as D. has me think, that we enjoy more fully our this-worldiness? Fatalism.

The texts we've read for this meeting of Terra Critica exclude from the start the analogy I'm suggesting, but I want to insist on it because I think it offers us a different and stronger description of the imaginative, rational and rhetorical work, the work of torsion and catachresis, that we must do to imagine (the word isn't right) or envision (also wrong) both disaster and other, alternative futures. There is nothing like the disaster in our experience—not because we, and each of us, hasn't found finitude written into our life, but because preferable analogues to finding finitude, envisioning disaster, and to imagining our death and our species-death are furnished everywhere by the great machine of global capital, immediately, in near loss-less translation across markets, chronologies, and cultures. The machinery of *deflection* is everywhere at work, differently today than it was one hundred years ago, different across the world of markets and the market in worlds. For *deflection* is the device of information-based

capital. Wherever there is extraction, production, distribution, and consumption, there's the creation of surplus desire and of the alternate object: nothing we consume quite completes the circuit that links what we want or are made to want, with what's extracted, produced, distributed and consumed. Our consumption, today, *is* deflection. I offer you the most vivid apocalypse, the certainty of what's to come—and if you find you take it, it's because the apocalypse and your end to come, or mine, are articulated in capital's defective and deflective language.

Visions don't come immediately, they never have. They come to us in the lexicon on offer, valued, marshaled, by the world that conditions us. When it's this lexicon and this conditioning world that we'd like to bring into question—because the lexicon is the condition of disaster and the disaster the condition of this lexicon, each proper and adequate to the other but also its product and the means of its perpetuation—then we must (again the register of obligation!) look elsewhere, and look differently. So it's the singular and undeflected disposition toward finitude that seems torn from us today, everywhere, by the marketing of disaster. With it we lose the disposition and the means of caring for the present and for the becoming-present of the future.

I'm not sure there ever was—or could be, since we're beings-in-language—an *undeflected* disposition toward the disaster.

Here's what's entailed by accepting that from the start, now and in the time to come, analogic deflection structures our disposition. "All great leaders have been visionaries," Donella Meadows wrote in 1994.

Even the scientific, systems-analyst side of me has to admit that we can hardly achieve a desirable, sustainable world, if we can't even picture what it will be like. ... So I invite you to join with me in building that vision. What kind of sustainable world do you WANT to live in? Do your best to imagine not just the absence of problems but the presence of blessings. ... But what else? What else do YOU want, for yourself, your children, your grandchildren? The best way to find your answer to that question is to go to a quiet place, close your eyes, take a few deep breaths, and put yourself in the middle of that sustainable world. Don't push, don't worry, and don't try to figure it out. Just close your eyes and see what you see.

"[C]lose your eyes and ... see what you see." Meadows is asking me to borrow from the possible future, the wished-for future, a "picture" of what I "want, for [my]self, [my] children, [my] grandchildren." I'm immediately on guard, put off. Whence this mistrust, and is it the same as—related to, even—the embarrassment that Meadows registers in herself and in others she's asked to envision alternatives to hunger, ecocide, nuclear war, and so on? As for me, I don't trust the demand she's making; I don't believe in vision, in what is immediately in-spired with the breath I take (the air I breathe isn't to be trusted for cleanliness; it's impure; traces of foreign and unhealthy substances mark it). I don't believe that the "charisma" with which vision endows

individuals—even me—is to be trusted. Even less do I trust the economy that sits beneath Meadows' vision of envisioning: I borrow images from the possible, wished-for future, use them now to guide me, and on arrival find myself rejoining the images, now literalized, now happily materialized. Nothing new, or frightful, or other, intrudes, if possible. The interest on my loan is paid in the time it takes me simply to fulfil the vision, in the time it takes me just to arrive. Debt and scheduled repayment smooth out the years before me; envisioning on this description masters time, economizes it, subjects it to the intuition of *duration*; "envisioning" renders the time before and behind us a familiar, value-producing instrument. The value here: nothing less than the alternative world we can produce from our visions of it.

Before writing *Air and Dreams* Bachelard published (in 1932) *L'Intuition de l'instant*, a strong argument against the Bergsonian account, precisely, of the way the intuition of duration structures human time. It's also an argument against the smoothness of economized time. Bachelard says:

1. Duration has no direct force; real time only really exists through the isolated instant, it is whole and entire in the actual, in the act, in the present.
2. However, a being is a place of resonance for the rhythms of moments and, as such, one could say that it has a past as one says that an echo has a voice. But this past is only a present habit, and this present state of the past is still a metaphor, one more. Indeed, for us, habit is not inscribed in a matter, in a space. It can only be an aural habit, a sound habit, which remains, we believe, essentially relative. The habit which, for us, is thought is too airy to be registered [to register to record itself], too immaterial to sleep in matter. It is a game that continues, a musical phrase that must be repeated because it is part of a symphony in which it plays a role. At least, this is the way we will try to bring into one [*solidariser*], by habit, the past and the future.

Rhythm, then, rather than duration—and rhythm registered or recorded rather than intuited. *Habit*, a "present habit" or habit of the present, here is the means for bringing-into-one, of solidarising, *solidariser*, present and past; and of bringing together present and future, a future that's *also* a metaphor of the present, more attenuated because the rhythms of what's to come as instant are still not given. ("Naturellement, du côté de l'avenir, le rythme est moins solide. Entre les deux néants : hier et demain, il n'y a pas de symétrie. L'avenir n'est qu'un prélude, qu'une phrase musicale qui s'avance et qui s'essaie. Une seule phrase. Le Monde ne se prolonge que par une très courte préparation. Dans la symphonie qui se crée, l'avenir n'est assuré que par quelques mesures.")

It's a difficult and unsatisfactory position. Bachelard, working from Gaston Roupnel's *Siloë*, wants to find a way to synthesize accident and historical knowledge. On May 2, 1943, in Dijon, he writes, concluding *Air and Dreams*:

As soon as we put language in its proper place, at the height of human evolution, it is revealed in its double effectiveness: it bestows on us the virtues of clarity and the powers

of dream. Really knowing the images of words, the images that exist beneath our thoughts and upon which our thoughts live, would advance our thinking in a natural manner. A philosophy concerned with human destiny must not only admit its images, but adapt to them and continue their flow. It must be an openly living language. It must study the literary man candidly, because the literary man is the culmination of meditation and expression, the culmination of thought and of dream.

“Admit...adapt to...continue,” *avouer, s’adapter, continuer*. The “virtue” of clarity and the “force” of dreams, revealed or unveiled by language, “as soon as it’s put in its proper place,” *à la pointe même de l’évolution humaine*, when it’s placed at the highest point of human evolution. Imagine writing these words in occupied France in 1943. The World War is at its most terrible just now; the horror of the camps is now universally known. What *is*, in 1943, the “highest point” of human evolution? Where does it lie, when? Is it continuous with the dreadful present? Can habit help us place it somewhere—in the past, in the future? Is “human language” the sort of thing that can be *placed*, or does it not rather emplace us?

It’s 1932. Bachelard advocates for the intuition of the instant, for making habit the foundation on which that intuition can take the place of the governing intuition of duration that Bergson advocated. By 1943, faced with disaster, in the midst of uncertainty, Bachelard seeks to place language in its proper place, in order to draw from it the metaphorical resources—clarity and power—required to describe the world around him: the worst. The compounding of metaphors is terrible: can language have a “place”? It is not an object (nor is “human evolution”); no “place” is proper to it, and no place can be its own. Bachelard seeks to ground metaphoric language in language’s proper, that is, non-metaphorical place—and to do so he makes both “human evolution” and “language” radically metaphorical. “Radically metaphorical” means: a figurative torsion that takes from past and future with no possibility of returning what’s taken, with or without interest, to its proper place.

What follows? The texts that we’re offered as prompts suggest: fiction and accident, fiction that renders representable a future imagined as continuous with the present (that is, as something over which we can have agency), *and* as accidental (compounded of the unforeseeable, not susceptible of mathematization, aslant the laws of probability). It’s fiction that installs us in Arcadia by means of deflections we cannot avoid, but which, also, cannot form part of the great and objectifying deflection-machine of global capital. It’s fiction that, at times and in spots neither it nor I can foresee, reminds me to remember that my death is waiting, and thus reminds me to await it, to live this moment in the metaphor of what’s naturally *and* accidentally to come. I’d like to say that what follows, and what allows us to work (with) the catastrophe, is telling stories that simultaneously withdraw and offer the dream of political agency, stories whose clarity and force work where we want them to, on the matter of day-to-day disasters present and to come—*and* where we do not want them to, outside their proper place, to ends we don’t and cannot, perhaps, know, or imagine, or envision. This “*and*” makes

room, in conjoining, *solidarising*, deflection, accident and intention, for the analogy between my remembrance of my death-to-come, and the finitude and impending collapse of human civilization. Such stories, then—let them come! Go out and *write them*, now, while we can still write, and while the space of the accidental is still open to our future!