

‘SPECTRE-BARK’: VISIONS AND VISITATIONS OF DISASTER

Accursedness is not a word one looks to call upon frequently. Our rational times take a robust view on execration. They seek to account for those states that scarcely admit the possibility of relief or redemption through explanations that indulge neither superstition nor fatalism. Nevertheless, there is a depth of negative experience in which awareness of having been overcome by disaster is so oppressive and penetrating that imputing its cause to the ‘motiveless malignity’ of a force greater than oneself appears to be the only way of rationalising adversity. To consider oneself cursed, or at any rate ill-destined, may therefore carry some consolation in the midst of the visitation of disaster. What it does not do is to dispel the sense of profound affliction. The distress that comes from incomprehension of the worst mischance is not easy to depict, but if we look closely this is what we shall see Anthony Catania’s latest exhibition, ‘Spectre-Bark’, exploring. It is as well to agree from the outset, therefore, that the works in ‘Spectre-Bark’, exhilarating though they are in the intensities of their inspiration and the assuredness of their technique, are not uplifting in terms of their theme or focus. What they depict is the penumbral space of hopelessness, where the prolongation of a sense of a disaster that is somehow both imminent but also recently visited upon those on whom it breaks is communicated, in a paradox that also carries great psychological realism, through a stilling of time—so that what we witness is the uncomfortable present continuous of monotonous doom. If the art is relentless in its insistence on the defiguration of prospect and hope, even repetitious in how it figures calamity, it is precisely because it is the stasis of accursedness, the unrelieved effects of disaster and the remoteness of any possibility of salvific transfiguration that shape its concerns.

What is it that precipitates Catania’s reflections on disaster? Anthony Catania’s exhibitions have accustomed us to what can seem like illustrations of critically transformative moments in specific myths, legends or fables. In *Selve Oscure* (2006), for instance, he was able to convey the instant—evanescent yet oddly timeless—when Ovidian metamorphosis between one state and another is nearly final yet not so resolved as to move mind away from transformation-in-process, from the poignant, simultaneous apprehension of what is forever shed and forever assumed. His last exhibition, *The Piper’s Requiem* (2008), was similarly interested in the moments before irrevocable catastrophe. There he succeeded in bringing to precarious life the scurrying, verminous urgency of the headlong rush by which the Pied Piper leads legions of rats to their death, so that when in other paintings it is the town’s children that are piped away, in scenes Catania renders in ethereally beautiful monochrome tones that set up an ironic contrast with the supposedly pied coloration of their guide’s costume, the horror is all the starker. These, quite clearly, are themes that are neither easy nor comforting. Catania now probes a greater challenge in ‘Spectre-Bark’. Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798; rev. 1817) is the inspiration this time. The events of the poem are well known and need not be summarised here. What, rather, should be emphasised is that it is not the entire poem that is the subject of Catania’s art. There is certainly nothing in these works, for instance, of the ‘merry minstrelsy’ of the wedding celebration that provides the unlikely backdrop to the Mariner’s tale. Nor, strikingly, is there any representation of the later parts of the poem, where expiation occurs and the curse that had fallen upon the Mariner after he had killed the fateful albatross is lifted. There is, however, the uncanniness of seeing depicted before us, repeatedly, the vehicle of the motivating simile in the poem that this exhibition reimagines: ‘As idle as a painted ship/Upon a painted ocean’ (ll. 117-18). We would do well, too, to remind ourselves of the lines from which the exhibition’s title derives and which show the ship the Mariner helps crew being stolen upon by another vessel, the ‘spectre-bark’. In the context of the poem’s ethical economy, the ‘spectre-bark’ appears like a punishing visitation that is not disproportionate to the killing of the albatross:

And those *her* ribs through which the Sun
Did peer, as through a grate ?
And is that Woman all her crew ?
Is that a DEATH ? and are there two ?
Is DEATH that woman's mate ?

*Her lips were red, her looks were free,
Her locks were yellow as gold :
Her skin was as white as leprosy,
The Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she,
Who thicks man's blood with cold.*

*Death and Life-in-Death have diced for the ship's crew, and she (the latter) winneth the ancient
Mariner.*

The naked hulk alongside came,
And the twain were casting dice ;
'The game is done ! I've won ! I've won !'
Quoth she, and whistles thrice.
No twilight within the courts of the Sun.
The Sun's rim dips ; the stars rush out :
At one stride comes the dark ;
With far-heard whisper, o'er the sea,
Off shot the spectre-bark. (ll. 185-202)

What these lines suggest, and what Catania's art responds to (see below), is that the albatross was always more than a bird: it is an embodiment of the principle of (mis)chance as well as of the temptation proffered to humanity to make dross use out of such beauty and hope that does alight and follow upon our lives. The Mariner succumbs to the temptation—'With my crossbow/I shot the albatross' (ll. 81-82)—and the subsequent curse of drifting companionless, like the Flying Dutchman, in what then becomes a daemonic world is not lifted until he senses the possibility of affirmation even in his distress and finds that he 'blessed ... unaware' the 'water-snakes' that tailed the ship in 'elfish light' and 'flash of golden fire' (ll. 273-87)—whereupon penance is done, even if he must be forever compelled to peripatetically tell his tale, to participate in constant striving and to be, like the Wandering Jew, a cautionary figure.

'Spectre-Bark' does not dwell on this redemptive dimension, which in the poem extenuates any 'motiveless malignity' (the phrase is of course Coleridge's, deployed by him in another context where he was commenting on Shakespeare's Iago) and imposes a Christianised story of expiation on what is otherwise a differently inclined work in terms of its investments in a supernatural cosmogony. Instead the exhibition dares to depict the unbroken despair associated with the earlier part of the poem. Above all, there is the valiancy of impossibly representing the 'hauntology' that centres on the spectre-bark.¹ If this is *necessarily impossible* it is because what is numinous and lacks shape or is otherwise in ceaseless metamorphosis eludes the forms and outline that figurative art would dress it in; if, on the other hand, we feel disposed after viewing the exhibition to picture the poem's happenings in our mind through the sometimes fibrous, sometimes filigree-like lines of Catania's own art, which somehow contrive to be awash with the diaphanous darkness that shadows the poem, it is in testimony to the extraordinary power of reimagination in these paintings. Look at the paintings exhibited here today: both theme and technique answer, to name just a few elements, to the 'o-ertaking wings' (l. 43), the 'dismal sheen' (l. 56), the 'restless gossameres' (l. 184) that Coleridge's poem speaks of. In all senses of the word, then, Catania's art is 'true'.

There is much I would want to say on the anamorphic forms of the truth of Catania's art, which works through a mysterious combination of oblique suggestion and direct portrayal, and through the paradoxes of an irreal naturalism. This is, again, entirely true to the challenges of representing spectrality, otherworldliness, haunting, or the spectre-bark itself, on which the presence of Life-in-Death figured as Woman imposes the uneasy decorum of a liminal art. I would also want to point to the exhibition's palette, and the way in which Catania's tendentially monochromatic technique contrives to convey the menacing colours—or, sometimes, lack of them—that render Coleridge's poem strangely garish or otherwise bleached and wan: the 'ice, mast-high, [...]green as emerald' (ll.

53-54), the 'fog-smoke white' (l. 77), the glimmering of 'white moon-shine' (l. 78), the 'hot and copper sky' (l. 111), 'the water, like a witch's oils/Burnt green, and blue, and white' (ll. 129-30). Here, however, I must stress something else. Quite simply, we might like to return to the implications of the fact that what this exhibition depicts is the heartlessness of disaster when one is at its heart.

There is, of course, nothing very simple there. Consider, as we edge towards what really hangs on this point on disaster, the curious fact that the exhibition does not make it easy to identify the gaze depicted. Whose is the seeing in these paintings? Who gazes from and on the space of disaster? We see the albatross swoop on the ship, for all the world (and a predatory world this is) like a screaming Stuka on a straggling merchantman—so that the analogy is not incongruous if it helps to remind us that it is what hurtles down from the sky, not what is descended upon, that suffers depredation. Image after image in this exhibition depict this encounter between albatross and ship, making the former look sinister rather than graceful or a portent of goodness and hope, so that we are reminded of the imminence of the disaster that is about to break but hasn't yet, not quite—not in Catania's iconography. In this exhibition, and except for the aqueous apparition in 'Blood Mist', we never, however, see the Mariner, though we intuit his fear all around; we do not see Life-in-Death, though we sense *her* circumambient preying. Catania, we sense, has understood that the albatross is in fact the harbinger of disaster: the bird allegorises (mis)chance, so that its encounter with the Mariner and the consequent onset of a very frightening hauntology was not inevitable even if comes to seem fated, like the first term in a malignly enchanted series. This, perhaps, is why the albatross seems so vampiric in Catania's art, almost as if Life-in-Death had metamorphically possessed it. When it descends upon the ship it does so in the same way that disaster, in life, bites on vitality, transforming existence and consigning it to the unbroken present continuous mentioned in the first paragraph above. Small wonder, then, that Catania paints this scene again and again, obsessively. Nothing is more fundamental to the truth that he paints. It is our own gaze that he turns on disaster, which we find allegorised in these works.

Perhaps we need to go to Maurice Blanchot and his book *The Writing of the Disaster* to understand this. Catania may or may not have had it in mind when conceiving this exhibition, but it hardly matters to know if he did, when what he manages to illustrate is the phenomenology of disaster as enacted through Coleridge's poem. Disaster, we know, can be both personal and collective: in the latter case, it may occur because of a cataclysmic event that undoes life on an unimaginable scale; in the former, survival and reminiscence may not ease but rather exacerbate the horror of what might follow on a split-second of ill-advised conduct or absolute misfortune. Whether the disaster is visited by circumstance or self-inflicted, the psychology of the aftermath is often itself catastrophic—indeed, beyond harrowing. Traditionally, Western thought has been coy about disaster, approaching it in the key of tragedy or trauma—almost as an alibi to thinking through the voiding and the total deformation that follows on the disastrous. There is, it has to be said, some extent of wholesomeness in this, for it allows the possibility of renewal and affirmation. The raw and unrelenting horror of disaster is somehow exorcised that way: tragedy, as the entire tradition has it, leaves space for catharsis and some degree of redemption; trauma, as Freud saw long ago, holds forth the promise of some degree of adjustment, even if only partially and gradually. Disaster, however, appears unmitigated. It is marked by incalculable loss, as well as devastation so comprehensive and penetrating and irruptive that it is not within the orders of the sustainable or the survivable, even if one lives on after it. The disaster, then, is what one cannot return from, and what one can scarcely figure to oneself or to others.

Maurice Blanchot is eloquent about this. 'The disaster,' he says, 'is what escapes the very possibility of experience—it is the limit of writing.'² And of painting, we might add, so that if 'the disaster de-scribes' it must also de-pict' (p. 7). If we read on in Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster* (1980) we find ourselves struck by the cue it gives us to intuiting what might be at stake, ultimately, in the trajectory that Catania's exhibition is de-scribing:

From the moment when the imminent silence of the immemorial disaster caused him, anonymous and bereft of self, to become lost in the other night where, precisely, oppressive night (the empty, the ever dispersed and fragmented, the foreign night) separated him so that the relation with the other night besieged him with its absence, its infinite distantness—from that moment on, the passion of patience, the passivity of a time without present (absent time, time's absence), had to be his sole identity, circumscribed by a temporary singularity. (p. 14)

If I leave further remarks about Blanchot's text to another commentary it is because we await another exhibition that attempts to portray the anguish of absolute detachment, 'the calm of the disaster' (p. 6), anticipated above. As it happens, Catania is already working on it. The trope of 'The Last Man' is, in fact, the subject that Catania's art seems to be irrepressibly evolving towards depicting. The Last Man—the figure of the sole human to survive an apocalyptic event—was first given literary form in works which appeared within thirty years of each other by such different writers as Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville (*Le dernier homme*, posthumously published in 1805), Byron ('Darkness', 1816) and Mary Shelley (*The Last Man*, 1826). Hence, in the stretched terms of literary history these works are roughly contemporaneous with the first recordings of the Flying Dutchman legend and, indeed, with Coleridge's own *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. In depicting the latter, Catania has already shown and arguably already illustrated, in part, the predicament of the Last Man. The Last Man is the one who, alone, can be aware of 'the extreme singularity' of complete disaster, because in his sole embodiment of 'the anonymous continuity of humanity' (p. 7) he cannot bear testimony to others about what he witnesses. There is nobody to witness his redemption either, if it occurs, nobody to shrive him—exactly, then, like the Ancient Mariner as Catania re-visualises him in 'Spectre-Bark' and who is not even figured, who does not appear, who is in fact de-visualised in practically all the works in the collection. It is yet another indication, if any were needed, of the truth-instincts that drive the spectropoetics of Catania's art, which is unflinching in its de-piction of the gaze on—and from—the disaster, which Blanchot equates with 'the heedless unlimited' (p. 2) and upon which it would be vain to try to impose shape, line, or form. 'The disaster ... dissuading us from the catastrophic or the tragic,' writes Blanchot, 'takes care of everything' (p. 3). Perhaps only what is unlimitedly heedless can take care of everything so completely. The question is therefore whether art, which must always feel it need heed nothing (even when it represents at and beyond limitation, and perhaps especially then) can take care of (or at least figure) that heedless heeding.

We can only await Antony Catania's next exhibition.

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Notes

¹ The term *hauntology* derives from Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), *passim*.

² Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 7. All further page references in the main text refer to this work.