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vicious circles
two fictions & «after the fact»

Maurice Blanchot
translated by Paul Auster
Mallarmé to an unpublished author who had asked him to write an introduction or prefatory note to his work: "I abhor prefaces that come from the author himself, but those that come from someone else I find even more distasteful. My friend, a real book needs no introduction; it's a bolt from the blue, and it behaves like a woman with her lover, needing no help from a third party, the husband..."

In a completely different context I have written: "Noli me tangere." A prohibition against reading that tells the author he has been disposed of. "You will not read me." '"I do not remain as a text to be read except through the process that slowly devours you while writing." '"You will never know what you have written, even if you have written only to find this out."

Prior to the work, the work of art, the work of writing, the work of words, there is no artist— neither a writer nor a speaking subject—since it is the production that produces the producer, bringing him to life or making him appear in the act of substantiating him (which, in a simplified manner, is the teaching of Hegel and even the Talmud: doing takes precedence over being, which does not create itself except in creating—what? Perhaps anything: how this anything is judged depends on time, on what happens, on what does not happen: what we call historical factors, history, without however looking to history for the last judgment). But if the written work produces and substantiates
the writer, once created it bears witness only to his dissolution, his disappearance, his defection and, to express it more brutally, his death, which itself can never be definitely verified: for it is a death that can never produce any verification.

Thus, before the work, the writer does not yet exist; after the work, he is no longer there: which means that his existence is open to question—and we call him an "author!" It would be more correct to call him an "actor," the ephemeral character who is born and dies each evening in order to make himself extravagantly seen, killed by the performance that makes him visible—that is, without anything of his own or hiding anything in some secret place.

From the "not yet" to the "no longer"—this is the path of what we call the writer, not only his time, which is always suspended, but what brings him to life through an interrupted becoming.

Has anyone noticed that Valéry, in imagining the utopia of Monsieur Teste, was the most romantic of men without knowing it? In his notes he writes innocently: "Ego—I dreamed of a being who had the greatest gifts—not to do anything with them, having assured himself [how?] that he had them. I told Mallarmé about it one Sunday on the quai d'Orsay." Now, what is this being—a musician, a philosopher, a writer, an artist, a Sovereign—who can do everything and yet does nothing? None other than the romantic genius, an I so superior to itself and its creation that it proudly forbids itself to be shown, a God then who refuses to be a demiurge, the infinite All Powerful One who will not condescend to be limited by a work, no matter how sublime (cf. Duchamp). Or else, it is in the most ordinary things that the extraordinary ones must be felt: no masterpiece (what poverty, what mediocrity in this master; to accept nothing less than being the greatest, the highest); but if Teste betrays himself, it is through the mystery of banality, through what makes him appear as someone unperceived. (I do not intend to diminish Valéry by revealing the adolescent naivete of his central project, and even less so because on top of this there is the demand of extreme modesty: the "genius" can only hide himself, efface himself; he cannot leave behind any marks, cannot do anything that could show him to be superior in what he does and even in what he is; the divine incognito, the hidden God, who does not hide himself in order to make the one who finally finds him more praiseworthy, but because he is ashamed of being God or knowing himself to be God—or, furthermore, God must remain unknown to himself, or else we would give him a Self, a self in our own image. I don't know if Freud, the unbeliever, thought that he had made the unconscious his God.)

After this parenthesis, I return to the problem. If the written word, which is always impersonal, changes, dismisses, and abolishes the writer as writer, if not the man or the writing subject (others will say that it enriches him, that it makes him more than he was before, that he is created by it—from which comes the traditional notion of the author—or else that it has no other end except to allow him to use his mind—Valéry again), yes, if the work, in its operation, no matter how slight it is, is so destructive as to engage the operator in the equivalent of suicide, then how can he turn back (ah, the guilty Orpheus) to what he believes he is leading into the light—to judge it, to consider it, to recognize himself in it and, in the end, to make himself the privileged reader of it, the principle commentator or simply the zealous helper who gives or imposes his version, resolves the enigma, reveals the secret and authoritatively interrupts (we are, after all, talking about the author) the hermeneutic chain, since he claims to be the adequate interpreter, the first or the last?

Noli me legere. Does this impossibility have an aesthetic, ethical, or ontological value? We would have to look at it more
closely. It is a polite appeal, a strange warning, a prohibition that has always let itself be violated already. "Please do not..." If the work is comparable to Eurydice, the request—the very humble request—not to turn around to look at it (or to read it) is just as anguishing for it, the one who knows that the "law" will make it disappear (or at least illuminate it to such a degree that it will dissolve in the light) that it is a temptation for the enchanter whose whole desire is to persuade himself that there is someone beautiful following him, rather than a futile simulacrum or a void wrapped in vain words. Even Mallarmé, the most secretive and discreet of poets, gives some hints as to the manner in which the Coup de dés should be read. Even Kafka read his stories to his sisters, sometimes even to a public audience, which, finally, does not mean that he read them for himself as pieces of writing—an affirmation of writing—but dangerously agreed to lend them his voice, to substitute for the legend (the enigma of what must be read) the living and speaking evidence of a diction and a presence that imposed its own meaning—or at least a meaning.

Such a temptation is necessary. To give in to it is perhaps inevitable. I remember the story, Madame Edwarda. I was surely one of the first to read it and to be convinced (overwhelmed to the point of silence) of what was unique about this work (only several pages long) and what set it above all literature, and in such a way that there could never be any word of commentary attached to it. I exchanged a few emotional words with Georges Bataille, not in the way you talk to an author about a book of his you admire, but in order to make him understand that such an encounter was enough for my entire life, just as the fact of having written the book should have been enough for his. All this happened during the worst days of the Occupation. This small book—the most minimal of books, published under a pseudonym and read by just a few people—was destined to sink clandestinely into the probable ruin of each of us (author, reader)—with no traces left of this remarkable event. As we know, things turned out differently.

Even so, without overstepping the bounds of tact, I would like to add something. Later, when the war was over and Georges Bataille's life had also changed, he was asked to republish the book—or, more accurately, to allow it to be given a real publication. To my great horror, he told me one day that he wanted to write a sequel to Madame Edwarda and asked my advice. I felt as though someone had just punched me; I blurted out: "It's impossible. I beg of you, don't touch it." The matter was then dropped, at least between the two of us. It will be remembered that he could not prevent himself from writing a preface under his own name, chiefly to introduce his name, so that he could take responsibility (indirectly) for a piece of writing that was still considered scandalous. But this preface, no matter how important it was, did not in the least undermine the absolute nature of Madame Edwarda—nor have the full-scale commentaries it has inspired (particularly the one by Lucette Finas and, more recently, the one by Pierre-Phillipe Jandin). All that can be said, all that I can say myself, is that the reading of this book has probably changed. Admiration, reflection, comparison with other works—the things that perpetuate a book are the very things that flatten it or equalize it; if the book raises up literature, literature reduces it to its own level, no matter what importance we might give it. What remains is the nakedness of the word "writing," a word no less powerful than the feverish revelation of what for one night, and forever after that, was "Madame Edwarda."

Vicious Circles. I have been asked—someone inside me has asked—to communicate with myself, as a way of introducing these two old stories, so old (nearly fifty years old) that, without
even taking into account the difficulties I have just expressed, it is not possible for me to know who wrote them, how they were written, and to what unknown urgency they were responding. I remember (it is only a memory and perhaps false) that I was astonishingly cut off from the literature of the time and knew about nothing except what is called classical literature, with nevertheless some inkling of Valéry, Goethe, and Jean-Paul. Nothing that could have prepared me to write these innocent stories that resound with murderous echoes of the future. There have been commentaries, profound commentaries that I will take care not to comment on myself, about "The Last Word" (1935). This piece was not written for publication. Nevertheless, it did finally appear twelve years later in the series "L’âge d’or" edited by Henri Parisot. But, as it happened, this was the last work in the series—which had run out of funds and was about to disappear—and the book was not even sold anywhere (if I am not mistaken). This was a way of remaining faithful to the title. Undoubtedly, to begin writing only to come so quickly to the end (which was the encounter with the last word), meant at least that there was the hope of not making a career, of finding the quickest way to have done with it right at the start (it would be dishonest to forget that, at the same time or in the meantime, I was writing *Thomas the Obscure*, which was perhaps about the same thing, but precisely did not have done with it and, on the contrary, encountered in the search for annihilation (absence) the impossibility of escaping being (presence)—which was not even a contradiction in fact, but the demand of an endlessness that is unhappy even in dying). In this sense, the story was an attempt to short circuit the other book that was being written, in order to overcome that endlessness and reach a silent decision, reach it through a more linear narrative that was nevertheless painfully complex: which is perhaps why (I don’t know) there is the sudden convocation of language, the strange resolution to deprive language of its support, the watchword (no more restraining or affirmative language, that is to say, no more language—but no: there is still a speech with which to say this and not to say this), the renunciation of the roles of Teacher and Judge—a renunciation that is itself futile—the Apocalypse finally, the discovery of nothing other than universal ruin, which is completed with the fall of the last Tower, which is no doubt the Tower of Babel, while at the same time the owner is silently thrown outside (the being who has always assured himself of the meaning of the word "own"—apparently God, even though he is a beast), the narrator who has maintained the privilege of the ego, and the simple and marvelous girl, who probably knows everything, in the humblest kind of way.

This kind of synopsis or outline—the paradox of such a story—is chiefly distinguished by recounting the absolute disaster as having taken place, so that the story itself could not have survived either, which makes it impossible or absurd, unless it claims to be a prophetic work, announcing to the past a future that has already arrived or saying what there still is when there is nothing: *there is*, which holds nothingness and blocks annihilation so that it cannot escape its interminable process whose end is repetition and eternity—the vicious circle.

Prophetic also, but for me (today) in a way that is even more inexplicable, since I can only interpret it in the light of the events that came afterwards and were not known until much later, in such a way that this later knowledge does not illuminate but withdraws understanding from the story that seems to have been named—by antiphrasis?—"The Idyll," or the torment of the happy idea (1936). The theme that I recognize first of all, because Camus made it familiar several years later—that is, made it the opposite of what he meant—is indicated in the first words: "the stranger." Who is the stranger? There is no adequate definition here. He comes from somewhere else. He is
well received, but received according to rules he cannot submit to and which in any event put him to the test—take him to death's door. He himself draws the "moral" from this and explains it to one of the newcomers: "You'll learn that in this house it's hard to be a stranger. You'll also learn that it's not easy to stop being one. If you miss your country, every day you'll find more reasons to miss it. But if you manage to forget it and begin to love your new place, you'll be sent home, and then, uprooted once more, you'll begin a new exile." Exile is neither psychological nor ontological. The exile cannot accommodate himself to his condition, nor to renouncing it, nor to turning exile into a mode of residence. The immigrant is tempted to naturalize himself, through marriage for example, but he continues to be a migrant. In a place where there is no way out, to escape is the demand that restores the call of the outside. Is it a vain attempt? The prison is not a prison. The guards have their weaknesses, unless their negligence does not belong to the make-believe freedom that would be a temptation and an illusion. Likewise, the extreme politeness, even sincere cordiality of those who regretfully apply the law, does not resemble the tranquil and inflexible "correction" which, several years later, caught willing slaves in the trap of their false humanity, slaves who were incapable of recognizing the masked barbarity that temporarily allowed them to live in a reassuring order.

And yet it is difficult not to think about all this after the fact. Impossible not to think of the ridiculous work carried out in the concentration camps, where the condemned transported mountains of stones from one spot to another and then back to the starting place—not for the glory of some pyramid, but to destroy work itself, along with the sad workers. This happened at Auschwitz, this happened at the Gulag. Which would tend to show that if the imaginary runs the risk of one day becoming real, it is because it has its own rather strict limits and that it can easily foresee the worst because the worst is always the simplest and it always repeats itself.

But I don't think that "The Idyll" can be interpreted as the reading of an already menacing future. History does not withhold meaning, no more than meaning, which is always ambiguous—plural—can be reduced to its historical realization, even the most tragic and the most enormous. That is because the story does not explain itself. If it is the tension of a secret around which it seems to elaborate itself and which immediately declares itself without being elucidated, it only announces its own movement, which can lay the groundwork for the game of deciphering and interpretation, but it remains a stranger to itself. From this, it seems to me, and even though it seems to open up the unhappy possibilities of a life without hope, the story as such remains light, untroubled, and of a clarity that neither weighs down nor obscures the pretension of a hidden or serious meaning. The questioning it would imply, I am told, could, in conjunction with the title, be expressed in different forms, all of them necessarily naive and simplistic: for example, why in such a world is the question of the masters' happiness so important and in the end still unresolved? There are appearances, there are only appearances, and how to believe in them, how to call them anything but what they are? Or, is a society which admits that the most unhappy episodes come from itself—either because of this or in spite of this—at heart idyllic? These are some questions, but they are too general to call forth answers, or not to remain questions in spite of the answers they are given. The story contains them perhaps, but on condition that it not be reduced through them to a content, to anything that can be expressed in any other way.

In all respects, it is an unhappy story. But, precisely, as a story, which says all it has to say in saying it, or, better, which announces itself as the clarity that comes both before and as a
condition of the serious or ambiguous meaning it also transcribes, it itself is the idyll, the little idol that is unjust and injurious to the very thing it utters, happy in the misfortune it portends and that it endlessly threatens to turn into a lure. This is the law of the story, its happiness and, because of it, its unhappiness, not because, as Valéry reproached Pascal, a beautiful form would necessarily destroy the horror of every tragic truth and make it bearable, even delicious (catharsis). But, before all distinctions between form and content, between signifier and signified, even before the division between utterance and the uttered, there is the unqualifiable Saying, the glory of a “narrative voice” that speaks clearly, without ever being obscured by the opacity or the enigma or the terrible horror of what it communicates.

That is why, in my opinion—and in a way different from the one that led Adorno to decide with absolute correctness—I will say there can be no fiction-story about Auschwitz (I am alluding to Sophie’s Choice). The need to bear witness is the obligation of a testimony that can only be given—and given only in the singularity of each individual—by the impossible witnesses—the witnesses of the impossible—; some have survived, but their survival is no longer life, it is the break from living affirmation, the attestation that the good that is life (not narcissistic life, but life for others) has undergone the decisive blow that leaves nothing intact. From this it would seem that all narration, even all poetry, has lost the foundation on which another language could be raised—through the extinction of the happiness of speaking that lurks in even the most mediocre silence. Forgetfulness no doubt does its work and allows for works to be made again. But to this forgetfulness, the forgetting of an event in which every possibility was drowned, there is an answer from a failing memory without memories, and the immemorial haunts this memory in vain. Humanity as a whole had to die through the trial of some of its members, (those who incarnate life itself, almost an entire people, a people that has been promised an eternal presence). This death still endures. And from this comes the obligation never again to die only once, without however allowing repetition to inure us to the always essential ending.

I return to “The Idyll,” a story from before Auschwitz, a story nevertheless of a wandering that does not end with death and which that death cannot darken, since it ends with the affirmation of the “the superb and victorious sky,” a stranger in a strange country, saying that no matter what happens, the light of what is said, even if it is in the unhappiest of words, does not stop shining, in the same way that light and airy radiance always transform the dark night, the night without stars. As if the darkness had become—is this a boon, is this a curse?—yes, had become the shining of the interminable day, the light of the first day.

A story from before Auschwitz. No matter when it is written, every story from now on will be from before Auschwitz. Perhaps life continues. Let us remember the end of The Metamorphosis. Right after Gregor Samsa has died in agony and solitude, everything is reborn, and his sister, even though she was the most compassionate of all, gives herself up to the hope of renewal that her young body promises her. Kafka himself thought he threw a shadow on the sun and that once he was gone his family would be happier. So he died, and then what happened? There was only a short time left; almost everyone he loved died in those camps which, no matter what their names, all had the same name: Auschwitz.

I cannot hope for “The Idyll” or “The Last Word” to be read from this perspective (this non-perspective). And yet, even wordless death remains something to be thought about—perhaps endlessly, to the very end. “A voice comes from the other shore. A voice interrupts the words of what has already been said.” (Emmanuel Levinas).