

**FAULT LINES:  
NARRATIVE, CATASTROPHE  
AND THE LISBON EARTHQUAKE OF 1755**

*Paulo de Medeiros  
Universiteit Utrecht*

“The disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact”

Maurice Blanchot

In one of the first, if not the very first, summary accounts of the events that destroyed Lisbon on the first of November 1755, the papal nuncio, Monsignor Filippo Acciaiuoli, writes to a brother in Rome on November 4, and carefully notes the position from which he describes the desolation he witnessed and experienced: “From a tent in the fields of the Benedictine monastery, I am writing to you, a humble herald of death, naked, poor and miserable, but miraculously sound” (Cardoso 20).<sup>1</sup> However, in the subsequent letters he sends both to the Cardinal Secretary of State, Cardinal Silvio Valentini Gonzaga, and to Pope Benedictus XIV, what the nuncio stresses, in spite of providing ample details, is the very impossibility of writing: “My confusion and desolation are such that I am unable to write and refer to Your Eminence the grave flagellation God had visit this city and its inhabitants” (Cardoso 22). This apparent contradiction has little or nothing to do with the lack of accurate information, or the emotional and physical suffering experienced by the nuncio, but rather with the very question of writing, both the writing on and during catastrophic times, as well as the writing of catastrophe, that is, the narrative process by which the very nature of the disaster, and not just its magnitude, is constituted. This issue is also the starting point for Helena Buescu’s essay on the representations of the 1755 earthquake, which opens the large volume she recently edited with a colleague: “With what words can one write on catastrophe?” (Buescu 19), a question that is echoed in other essays, and which I am indeed tempted to echo here with a slight alteration, aware of the difficulty inherent in still pretending to say something on

the subject. The question is not merely rhetorical. Indeed, one could say that it is everything but rhetorical even though it does have to do with rhetorical form. For what is at stake is precisely how language relates to reality, how it both describes reality and in that process constructs it, how language may seem to pale when compared with the magnitude of disaster, of human suffering, and of how language is crucial for remembering, witnessing, even forgetting that which would appear to be not only beyond words but beyond all. That brings me to that other paradox implied in the epigraph from Blanchot, that “the disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact” (1).

One of the important considerations Helena Buescu raises is that the language of disaster is not exclusive to actual disaster. She opens her essay with an extended quotation that for all purposes appears to be a description of the actual effects of the earthquake, but in reality, as she subsequently explains, comes from a text on ethics, “Reflections on Vanity” written by Matias Aires and published in 1752, three years before the earthquake. As Raúl Antelo notes in his essay, “*Maximam et nullam*,” catastrophic writing could also be seen as a possible cause for further disasters, an accusation frequently hurled at Jesuit writings on the earthquake by the Portuguese government at the time. But that is a question I wish to suspend for now, as I want to look somewhat more closely at what the nuncio wrote. The first narration of the disaster, the letter of November 4 Monsignor Acciaiuoli sent to his brother in Rome, was written while the disaster was taking place. Granted, the major catastrophe had already taken place, its impact as unexpected had already passed, but nonetheless, besides the minor aftershocks that would still be felt for many days, fire was still raging in the city and the nuncio, who had escaped the fall of his house in his bed clothes, awaited not only the complete destruction of its ruins but could see no end to the spreading of the fire. As such, it is striking not only that he can write with detail but also that he can actually write at all. His letter, addressed to a brother, is less formal than the other reports he sends to his superiors, but nonetheless it elegantly states his position and

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that is what I wish to consider briefly. The nuncio refers to himself as poor and naked, as worthy of compassion but also as miraculously sound or saved. Death had not come for him, even though it did for thousands and had taken those very close to him, his secretary, the housemaster and other servants as well as some mules, as he tells his brother. Death, however, was still running free in the streets of Lisbon, so to speak, and so might also claim him at anytime: “Lisbon is a pile of stones. Now the fire reaches my house; all the houses that remained immune from the ruins catch on fire because of an underground fire. I am full of confusion and pain” (Cardoso 21). One could expect perhaps that the letter would be alarmist, sensationalist, or otherwise capitalizing on the immenseness of the devastation. But that is not the case at all. Certainly, the nuncio expresses his emotions, does not hide the imminent danger he faces, and does not minimize the magnitude of the disaster. But his writing is elegant and, one would almost think, serene. It is remarkable how it avoids the sensationalism that would characterize so many writings inspired by the disaster either then or even now. The nuncio also refers to himself as a “*mísero avanço da morte*” in other words, as a humble herald of death, both a messenger of death and a bringer of death, the front line of death. It is a curious way to refer to himself, and even if one sees it as a rhetorical device, which it is, its polysemic meaning cannot be avoided, insofar as the nuncio literally functions as the herald of disaster, both its announcer as well as its keeper. We will now refer to this in his descriptions which provide priceless documentation of the catastrophe, of witnessing disaster. Even if the nuncio, himself injured, did not die immediately, his view of time after the catastrophe is certainly changed. Changed, not in the sense that he cannot keep time, he does so with as much accuracy as possible even in that first letter: “Saturday, All Saints Day, at ten o’clock in French time, an earthquake surprised us, which destroyed all Lisbon in eight minutes” (Cardoso 20); but changed in the sense that the future will never be the same as he mentions to the cardinal-secretary: “The ruination is such that Lisbon, in a hundred years, will not return to what it

was” (Cardoso 23). What the catastrophe destroyed in eight minutes cannot be rebuilt in the period of a century. Still, even though disaster completely alters the notion of future time, it does not, in the case of the nuncio, destroy the very idea of future. That is remarkable insofar as it represents one of the few instances in which a description of the magnitude of the catastrophe does not also imply the impossibility of conceiving future time. As Blanchot affirms: “To think the disaster ... is to have no longer any future in which to think it” (1).

How remarkable it is that the nuncio—double messenger as he is, both the messenger of the pope to the Portuguese king, as well as the unwitting messenger of death to his brother first, and then to the cardinal-secretary and the pope—can write on the catastrophe, without annulling it or the future. This remarkable quality can be seen if one compares his letters to the first published news about the earthquake, in the edition of November 6 of the *Gazeta de Lisboa*. As has been noted before, the mere fact that the *Gazeta de Lisboa* went to press on that early day is also quite remarkable. But the nature of its description of the catastrophe is equally remarkable, as André Belo first noticed in an essay on the sociology of reading. The report of the *Gazeta de Lisboa* is extremely succinct. It notes the magnitude of the event but offers no details, except to note that some of the goods belonging to the royal family and other notables were already being salvaged: “The first of the current [month] will stay memorable throughout all centuries for the earthquakes and fires that destroyed the greater part of this city; but luckily (tem havido a felicidade) amidst the ruins there have been found the coffers of the royal treasury and of the greater part of private people.” This should be contrasted with the letters of the nuncio who, even in the first letter, already mentions how the king escaped in bed clothes, and sleeps inside a cart under a makeshift tent while there are thousands of dead left to be buried, and how he himself had to flee stepping over the ruins and the dead. Surely Belo is right in noting how important it is that the news were printed at all and that the reporting done then did not follow our current norms and

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expectations. Nonetheless, the combination of no details on the destruction combined with the emphasis on the positive aspect of the situation is striking, even if later on more details would get published. One could speak of a silencing of disaster, even of an impossibility of writing the disaster and a concomitant desire to look beyond it.

The report of the earthquake in the *Gazeta de Lisboa* is mute on the extent of destruction, yet it asserts, boldly and rightly, that the memory of the event would remain through the centuries. This shows how, like the nuncio, the writer or writers of the *Gazeta de Lisboa* refuse to yield to an indulgence on the apocalyptic, something that will characterize much of the writing on or about the Lisbon earthquake and not just in pamphlets or sermons intended to instill fear. But, whereas in the *Gazeta de Lisboa* such sobriety appears even excessive, in the case of the nuncio it is balanced by the fact that he does not avoid writing on the details of the catastrophe, that his writing is indeed caused by the catastrophe without becoming like it. In other words, the letters of the nuncio, and in particular the first one to his brother, at the same time that they imagine the future consequences of the earthquake, do not fail to bear witness to its present ones. I think this is a crucial point in the discussion and one that must be kept always in mind when attempting to think about disaster or the relation between writing on disaster and disaster itself, if theorizing about such events is to claim some rigor, and also assume its ethical responsibility.

So far I have been employing the terms catastrophe and disaster almost as synonyms but one should also pause briefly to consider that issue. The way in which someone such as Blanchot conceives of disaster is not quite the same as what generally is advanced as disaster or catastrophe. That is obvious throughout his varied fragments in *The Writing of the Disaster* and immediately so in the opening one, already partially quoted: “To think the disaster (if this is possible, and it is not possible inasmuch as we suspect that the disaster is thought) is to have no longer an future in which to think it” (1). Blanchot’s complex thought and his preference for the fragmentary have been amply discussed before. Of rele-

vance are the considerations of the imbrication of thought and the fragment, as variously and extensively analyzed by Schulte-Nordholt (1995), Gregg (1994) and Collin (1986), among others. Significantly, Schulte-Nordholt refers to Blanchot's questioning of discourse in a way that sees language as always constituted by discontinuity so that the fragmentary would be one form of addressing that condition and of opening up space for alterity (99-109). Gregg, arguably, takes this notion further and makes a more direct link between the choice for the fragmentary and ethical issues: "One aspect of fragmentary writing is that it appears at the end of history as an index of surplus negativity that persists in the wake of totalization" (98). The letters written by the nuncio, obviously, are not fragments in a strict sense. Each one can be considered as a whole in itself. And yet, one could regard each one individually as a fragment towards a whole that is never realized. This line of argumentation might appear specious to some. Nonetheless, I think it is important to consider it, so that we may properly assess how invoking Blanchot might help to reconsider the writing on 1755 as writing on disaster. The point is not whether or not the nuncio wrote his letters as fragments but whether applying reflection on the notion of fragment might bring out some of the relevance of the peculiarity of those letters. 1755 was not the end of history of course, and most certainly not the end of history in the sense Fukuyama would give to it and Gregg might have in mind. But, just as obviously, it signaled for many at the time the announcement of an imminent end, not just to material history but to the universe as a whole and, more importantly, it did bring about an end to a certain way of perceiving the world in intellectual terms. It is along those lines that I think it makes sense to relate the comments on Blanchot's engagement with thought, negativity, and the fragmentary to the letters of the nuncio. If one does so, then the discrepancy between that first letter and the subsequent ones, that is, the difference between the possibility of writing on disaster, indeed of writing disaster, without being engulfed by it and rejecting any possibility of future thought, becomes clearer.

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As is well known, Blanchot has in mind specifically the Holocaust when referring to disaster. As such, of course, there is a distance between Blanchot's reflection on disaster and on the writing of and on disaster, and anything we might want to say about the Lisbon earthquake. However, that distance, though real, is by no means absolute, as has also been argued, most importantly by Susan Neiman, whose claims I would like to come to soon. For my purposes, even while acknowledging the differences between the forms of disaster or catastrophe being contemplated, Blanchot's problematization is important for a number of reasons. First, Blanchot addresses the issue of writing in relation to disaster, and he does so in such a way that writing and disaster become collapsed at points. This is significant for an analysis of writing on the Lisbon earthquake because even though we still have some visual reminders of the earthquake itself—literary descriptions that contain many visual markers, and the current shape of Lisbon's downtown area, which masks the devastation wrought by the disaster—it is mainly through writing that we come to an understanding of that particular catastrophe.

Second, Blanchot goes to the extreme of considering that thinking disaster might indeed be an impossibility, since thought would already be disaster itself. Certainly there are several ways in which such an apparent aporia might be made more understandable, even if at the risk of reduction, possibly even a negation of the very force of Blanchot's thought. One such reduction that could help at the moment would be to consider that disaster—excessive, absolute, disaster or evil—is to be seen not as something transcendental but rooted in the very essence of human logic. While this might then appear to make Blanchot's thought inapplicable to the Lisbon earthquake—a “natural” disaster—it would be my contention that the way in which we can know it, that is, the way we can understand it, remember it, analyze it, is purely cultural.<sup>2</sup> 1755 persists in cultural memory but only through discourse. Where one might want to make a distinction, and that too could be said to be an ethical imperative, would be between those representations fashioned after the

event and those by eyewitnesses. This is not because of a presumed authority invested in the latter but because their experience of the disaster is as much somatic as discursive. Nonetheless, even for those who experienced and survived 1755, the only way open to process disaster would have been cultural. Incredibly difficult and painful as it must have been, as indeed the words of Monsignor Acciaiuoli confirm—"I am full of confusion and pain"—the 1755 Lisbon earthquake did not preclude thought about itself. Quite the opposite, one could say that the earthquake unleashes a torrent of reflection that would signify the end of Leibnizian optimism and the inauguration of the modern age. That must also be qualified, but there is no doubt that 1755 marks an indelible caesura in Western thought, indeed in the way the world was conceived. Would this then mean that Blanchot's category would not apply? Would it even seem inappropriate to link the Lisbon earthquake with the Holocaust or with 9/11? In Susan Neiman's view, that is not so. Indeed, in her important and extensive discussion of *Evil in Modern Thought*, she starts precisely from a discussion of the Lisbon earthquake: "The eighteenth century used the word *Lisbon* much as we use the word *Auschwitz* today ... A central reason for locating the modern as beginning at Lisbon is precisely for its attempt to divide responsibility clearly" (Neiman 1-4). If until Lisbon there was no clear distinction between natural and moral evil, afterwards this division would assume ever sharper contours in what Neiman refers to as a process of coming to maturity of Enlightenment thought.

While I agree with her position, I am nonetheless bothered by what at times seems like an instrumentalization of the Lisbon earthquake that ends up silencing some of its particular historicity even as it adds other dimensions to it. In a previous essay, I pointed out the issue of our lack of knowledge concerning the fate of common people (Medeiros 2005). That is one aspect of the question that further research, and especially from an archeological perspective, might illuminate, provided that the perspective, up to now principally focused on issues of established power, shifts. Another issue I had, concerned the fact that discussion of the

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Lisbon earthquake raged throughout Europe and engaged its great minds but was conducted very differently, if at all, in Portugal itself. I advanced a split between a discourse of catastrophe that characterized European thinking to a great extent and a discourse of reconstruction and progress, a future-oriented discourse but one that obliterated the past, as characteristic of discussions in Portugal. I am pleased to see that others, Estela Vieira (2005), for instance, have examined the matter in more detail, and have a similar opinion. The diverse cultural events that took place in 2005 in memory of 1755 have already contributed significantly to change what I then considered an almost willed if never admitted amnesia or partial amnesia of the earthquake on the part of the Portuguese. In terms of the significance of 1755 for a construction of cultural memory in relation to the national imaginary, this is a significant shift. That is, for centuries the earthquake functioned as a ghost, always returning to haunt the consciousness of the present but never quite admitted—always sublimated into something else as in the report of the *Gazeta de Notícias*: yes, the earthquake destroyed a great part of Lisbon but was it not good that the king's coffers were found; was it not lucky that Lisbon could thus be rebuilt as a completely modern city?

Turning the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 into the decisive moment in the rupture towards a modern consciousness, or at least a modern ethical thinking, runs the risk of effecting a similar displacement. After all, Susan Neiman's extremely insightful book takes Lisbon as the point of departure but her object of study is not the Lisbon earthquake or its representations, but the thought that it inspired. She is not alone in that. As Estela Vieira has pointed out, a recent discussion of architecture in the aftermath of 9/11 starts with an essay by Kenneth Maxwell on the Lisbon earthquake. Likewise, Michel Serres (2004) also uses 1755 in order to reflect on the Sumatra-Andaman disaster of December 2004. Doubtless, the examples could be multiplied.

My concern is not so much with the use of 1755 as a reference point for current thinking on catastrophe but rather with the uses it is put to in such a process. If I am right in seeing a

relative lack of writing about the Lisbon earthquake on the part of the Portuguese, or an emphasis on a narrative of progress rather than on a narrative of catastrophe as characterizing Portuguese writing on the matter throughout the centuries, the question that raises itself concerns why this is changing now. Different anniversaries of the earthquake always produced some public, governmental, attention. But none that can compare to what was done in and around 2005. The reasons for this might be very simple as Portugal, after 1974, has seen some significant changes in the organization of research, publishing has become more accessible, access to documents has been greatly increased, and researchers themselves operate differently. Nonetheless, one should pause to reflect on what the recent outburst of writing on the earthquake, including fiction, might also represent.<sup>3</sup> Here I would like to take a cue from Boaventura de Sousa Santos, who has recently advanced the notion that Portugal, after 1974, rapidly switched its paradigms for national representation and as quickly as it abandoned its imperial fantasies, embraced its European identity.<sup>4</sup> There is nothing really new in that of course, but for the fact that it should be placed in a perspective of intellectual reflection and not just at the level of popular sentiments or governmental ideologies. From that perspective, one could suggest that one reason for neglecting the reflection on the 1755 Lisbon earthquake by the Portuguese was linked to a concentration of efforts into promoting an image of Portugal as empire instead of an image of the nation as a minor European state. Consequently, the return of Portugal to its European borders implies an acceptance of its smallness and a concomitant search for other signs of greatness. If, as Boaventura de Sousa Santos suggests, the myth of Portugal as imperial nation had to be switched for another one that restricted it to Europe, then it makes sense to look for moments in which the nation had served as a model for Europe and the Lisbon earthquake, in all its horror, certainly was one of them. To be fair, Boaventura de Sousa Santos never makes that assertion. I would not completely follow some of his claims as I am not convinced that the imperial imagining of Portugal was in opposition to an

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idea of its being a European state. But that is another discussion. What I would like to stress is the need to see whether current discussions of the earthquake are also not becoming instrumentalized and co-opted to propagate a certain view of Portugal that ends up, again, but this time around in an opposite manner, obliterating the very thought on that catastrophe, on that disaster. Because to do so would amount to a perversely ironic enactment of Blanchot's notion that "the disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact." Certainly, many current efforts are not part of such an instrumentalization. The essay by Raúl Antelo (2005), for instance, in the links it makes between the Lisbon earthquake and the one that preceded it in Lima, does go against such a grain even as it, too, risks an attempt at theorizing that effects a certain reinscription of the discourse on the earthquake as a form of annulment. Or the essay by David Jackson (2005), which, precisely because it links the discourse on the earthquake with the discourse on the imperial project, or rather, its reverse side, the narratives of shipwrecks, prevents an all too easy dichotomy between the discourse of expansion and the discourse of European integration. Nonetheless, in my opinion, as valuable as the majority of current contributions are, I still would like to call attention to the need to prevent a simple appropriation that would substitute the founding myth of a Portuguese origin of modernity at the time of the voyages of discovery, with another founding myth of a Portuguese origin of modernity, some two hundred years later, at the time of the Lisbon earthquake. Otherwise, the fault line in question stops being that occasioning the seismic event to become a fault line—both as a fissure, in the sense of a gap, but also as an error—in our thought, our writing, about catastrophe. If the message of the nuncio is to hold, that is, if we are to be able to not only remember the calamity of 1755, but think it, and in doing so, think for the future, we should strive to do such reflection in a similar way, attentive of the personal, situated, disaster, and aware of the fact that we all remain, in a sense, like him, humble heralds of death.

Notes:

1. Before publishing these documents in a book, in Portuguese translation, Arnaldo Pinto Cardoso had already published a transcription of the original documents, in Italian, in *Revista de Historia das Ideias* 18 (1996): 441-510. When I translated the citations to English, I based myself on the texts published in Portuguese but consulted the original text as well.

2. For more on this see the essay by Helena Buescu in this volume of *ellipsis*.

3. Several essays in *O Grande Terramoto de Lisboa: Ficar Diferente* do analyze several recent works of fiction related to 1755. Estela Vieira (2005 and in this volume of *ellipsis*) provides a significant historical perspective on such representations and Helena Buescu also refer to them in several publications, including her essay in the *European Review*.

4. I refer here to an unpublished address given by Boaventura de Sousa Santos at the Fifth International Congress of the American Portuguese Studies Association, which took place at the University of Minnesota, October 2006. However, some of the ideas presented there were already sketched out in parts of a book he recently co-edited, with A. Rodriguez-Garavito, on *Law and Globalization from Below* (2005).

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