Writing (The) Impossible

*Stream3: Organization / Literature: Beyond Equivalence and Antinomy*

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1 Author for communication
Writing (the) Impossible

For Bataille, Blanchot and Hegel writing as a form of communication is inextricable linked to and comes of the Impossible. Yet whilst it does so it neither reveals nor holds the Impossible and indeed is ultimately opened up by it – outliving the writer, writing (re)introduces Death into the world, a loss of meaning and reasserts the ephemerality of being. Blanchot attempts to convey this through a use of fragmented writing, Bataille – perhaps typically – introduces ellipses into his writing to convey the stuttering of language when faced by the Impossible.

Turning to Blanchot one concern of his is to consider writing in terms of a double slope. One involves the traditional concerns within literature between form and content. The other however introduces the informe, the formless, and thus instigates a movement between organization and collapse that catches, grounds, repeats and refashions writing whilst suggesting paradoxically a beyond.

Three lines of thought arise. First if, as this stream perhaps suggests, there are similarities between organization(s) and writing then what might be the import of Blanchot’s double slope? Are we in a state between form and informe, being and nothing, organization and loss? To rephrase: is it less, to paraphrase Heidegger, a question of ‘Why is their being rather than nothing’ as a quasi-Hegelian dialectic than being-nothing/organization-loss as Bataillean double binds. Second, to reintroduce the first slope, does Bataille’s stuttering seem to convey this when Blanchot’s does not? Finally, faced with the Impossible what is there left for organization studies to write (inadequately) except perhaps its own sense of loss, bewilderment and hollowness, how to write the Impossible … … … … … … … beyond … … … … … … … beyond writing … … … … … … … writing beyond writing … … … … … … …?

Introduction

Within organizational studies there has been a turn towards a form of subjective writing (Weick 2003). This displacement should evince a sensitivity towards a postmodern sensibility and style as a much needed response to the epistemological concerns of much of organizational theory, ostensibly postmodern or otherwise (Parker 1992), or the systemic modernity of more traditional management discourse (Cooper and Burrell, 1988). However, in many instances this shift towards the subject is little more than a play of mirrors, the author change s from an objective to a subjective voice but remains in a Cartesian-Kantean orbit. Our concern in this paper is to argue against this continued domination of organizational writing, consider some of the potential dysfunctional affects and outline an alternative. To do this we intend to draw on a number of sources. These will range from the literary and philosophical theories and writings of, for instance, Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot, the extra linguistic creative narratives of some musicians, composers and artists, and the empirical experiences of a writer without content (to paraphrase Agamben).
And now the theory

Maurice Blanchot argued throughout his work against the structuralist and formalist perceptions of literature. For Blanchot every work is singular and attests to its autonomy through its refusal of a complete interpretation. Thus an understanding of one work does provide an a priori understanding of another: ignorance is integral to literature, an ignorance that we do not negate by the accumulation of knowledge:

Reading is ignorant. It begins with what it reads and in this way discovers the force of a beginning. It is receiving and hearing, not the power to decipher and analyze, to go beyond by developing or to go back before laying bare; it does not comprehend (strictly speaking), it attends. A marvelous innocence.

(Blanchot, 1993: 320)

Now what is ‘true’ for reading is also perhaps suitable for both writing and writers: as writers, and what we write, exist in isolation and in ignorance, for writing is indelibly (in)formed by reading – there is no understanding before the act of writing-reading, no objective position and indeed no writer before or after the event.

Blanchot follows and extends Hegel’s contention of language as negativity. For Blanchot writing voids both the reality of a thing and the presence of the idea. In the first instance language operates as a marker for a thing even whilst the word is not that thing: language negates the real in favor of an idea. Since language does not represent the real, we as speaking subjects are also distanced from them in the absence of language. For Blanchot the word refers back to the very thing it has negated. In doing so it covers over the act of negation by replacing the thing with an idea: words refer to ideas not things. Language is thus both destructive – the negation of the thing - and creative, it develops the idea to take the position vacated by the thing. Negation negated.

Rather than replacing the absence of the thing with the presence of an idea, literature demands that we experience absence as absence, an absence of thing and concept that displaces meaning and implies infinite interpretation. Words, by referring only to other words, and not things or concepts, suggest that the demand of writing, the désœuvrement (or worklessness) of a work, is its refusal of meaning.

For Blanchot writing moves between two slopes: a realist slope of meaningful prose that replaces things and represents the real world in terms of concepts, and the (poetic) slope of literature where meaning and comprehension are denied. Our contention is that writers on organization have preferred the former slope regardless of the form of the work, to whit whether or not the subjective voice is used. For those ‘authors’ grounded in objective, neutral, technical writing this singular use only of meaningful prose is a non-issue whilst for those who follow the subjective turn it implies that only style rather than substance has changed. To both however we would add a caveat – you ignore the désœuvrement of ‘your’ work at your own peril, there is no external reality to give a stable meaning to you and your world.
Désœvrement

Literature is divided between these two slopes. … The first slope is meaningful prose. Its goal is to express things in a language that designates things according to what they mean. … But still on this side of language, there comes a moment when art realises that everyday speech is dishonest and abandons it. What is art’s complaint about everyday speech? It says it lacks meaning: art feels it is madness to think that in each word something is completely present through the absence that determines it, and so art sets off in quest of a language that can recapture the absence itself and represent the endless movement of comprehension. (Blanchot, 1995; 332-3.)

Roland Barthes is justly celebrated for having announced the death of the writer – a concept that owes much to Blanchot. We write in the positive hope that our words and work will outlive us and in so doing carry with them so vestige, some spectre, of our authorial presence. Yet this hope has a bleak message as well – our writings have a life of their own that exists beyond and out lasts ours and marks the very absense of the writer from the writing. As such death speaks through the writer and writing.

Blanchot reveals the absence of language and demand of writing to be premised on death: a writing however that maintains our human potential and possibility. Writing is a response to the very nothingness at the core of our existence; we write to evade this nothingness in the hope that our words will outlast us and gives a reprieve from death. Yet contra Heidegger (1962: 308) Blanchot maintains that we do not claim our existence by facing up to the brute reality of our impending, individual deaths (Heidegger’s possibility of the impossible’), it is instead a continuous burden or work that we perform, we do not overcome death – we endure it. According to Blanchot we are continual dying, life is only a special condition of death (Bataille 1988) that reveals the ephemerality of the subject. This experience of dying reveals that we cannot ultimately make our world and life meaningful to ourselves as individuals. In dying the ‘I’ is finally overcome and lost to become the one (everyone) who dies: death is not then the highest possibility or culmination of our individual lives nor is it some thing that we can reach beyond to some how achieve a more pure, authentic life, it does however lead to human community that one experiences (and denies) we all experience (and deny) (Blanchot 1988). Literature and writing are not a completion of life and meaning and the invention of stories and possibilities but an attempt to ‘recapture this prior presence that I must exclude’ (Blanchot 1993: 36). The demand of writing does not reveal the writer, the subject ‘I’, but the very impossibility of saying ‘I’: the demand is the activity ‘writing’ that denies the authorial ‘I’. The activity of writing is itself a struggle of the work to (re)invent language in its own way. The narrative voice is not that of the ‘author’ but the anonymous process of writing, a voice ‘outside’ language.

There is thus no sense of a completion, no completion of knowledge, no transcendental position from which to observe, monitor and manage life and existence. There is instead only an on-going, non-completable engagement with the Hegelian Absolute. This is less
Spirit’s work towards (re)completion, self-affirmation and self-actualisation as its, irony, dread and pathos in experiencing that it will never be complete. Ironic since it is only through this that Spirit avoids totalisation and Death coupled with a dread that results from experiencing death as the core of existence. This dread then requires that we write, it ‘opens and closes the sky, needs the activity of a man sitting at his table and forming letters on a piece of paper’ (1981: 6). It requires that the writer writes (about) nothing, about this vertiginous experience of death and it requires that the writer, ‘perform a genuine sacrifice of himself. He must spend, he must consume, the forces that make him a writer’ (1981: 7).

Second slope: Writing death

Writing and literature is the demand that writer attempts to describe dread, one however that is impossible since it cannot be fully expressed and fulfilled. We have to write and communicate and in doing so often fall back on established rules of writing: form, style, genre, etc. Yet these rules limit writing and so to write death, to remain faithful to an experience of life that endures, requires that established rules must be transgressed.

The first slope of literature is based on negation where real things are replaced and negated by concepts. The writer here comes to usurp the position of God: in their solipsism they think their world in to existence. The second slope however attempts a return to God, a quest for what the first slope has denied, for what was before it was negated. Since conscious though is the movement of the first slope the second is an attempt to communicate the unthought, this writing attempts to recover things before they were fatally named. Both slopes ultimately however undo and negate: the first through naming and the second by revealing. What was prior to words is only made apparent, is only revealed, through an act of revelation that reduces it to banal presence.

Writing for Blanchot introduces an ambiguity: it moves between the slopes of literature. In so doing this movement denies ultimately the professed intentions of the writer:

If you convince yourself that you are indeed there where you wanted to be, you are exposed to the greatest confusion because literature has already insidiously caused you to pass from one slope to the other and changed you into what you were not before.

(1981: 52)

For Blanchot there is perhaps no way out from this ambiguity for the writer. The writer cannot avoid reducing and confusing the work of writing with the book that is published. In this désavouement ‘the writer belongs to the work, but what belongs to him is the book’ (1982: 23). Writing is ultimately ambiguous but given the demand of writing how are we to respond to the dread that impels and write the second slope? Is it possible to approach the second slope without moving back to the first? How can we avoid reducing the irreducible, making the unknowable known? The progression of Blanchot’s work suggests that an answer lies in a form of radical passivity as an openness to what is totally
other. Whilst Blanchot asks that we await and accept what will come Bataille perhaps offers a (transgressive) response for writing.

**Ellipse and ipséité**

Bataille, as with Blanchot, regarded life as something that we work at and endure. Within this life there can be moments of beauty and joy where we sit back and admire. These times are however only moments in a life as stillness is overcome by the momentum of life without end: there is no fulfillment, no end point but there is a vertigo inducing rush. Yet nor should we succumb to this vertigo or refuse it totally for:

> He alone is happy who, having experienced vertigo to the point of trembling in his bones, to the point of being incapable of measuring the extent of his fall, suddenly finds the unhoped-for strength to turn his agony into a joy capable of freezing and transfiguring those who meet it.  
> (Bataille, 1985: 236)

We must find someway of experiencing and practicing life as an active ‘joy before death’ that is both ‘ecstatic contemplation and lucid knowledge’ (Bataille 1985: 236). Writing is thus a performative operation that in-forms at the same time as calling the subject and knowledge in to question. Life is less a progression from nothing to form as a revelation of its own meaninglessness.

> For academics to be satisfied, it would be necessary, in effect, for the universe to take on a form. The whole of philosophy has no other aim; it is a question of fitting what exists into a frockcoat, a mathematical frockcoat. To affirm on the contrary that the universe resembles nothing at all and is only formless, amounts to saying that the universe is something akin to a spider or a gob of spit.  
> (Bataille, 1929: 382)

In a relatively short piece ‘Formless’ Georges Bataille outlined the *informe* (the formless) as a performative operation that opposes stable motifs by ‘break[ing] up the subject and re-establish[ing] it on a different basis’ (Bataille 1983: 95). The *informe*, as Bois and Kraus (1997: 21) argue is, ‘an alteration that has nothing to do with the morphological or semantic registers of any particular object, but rather with the interpretive grid’ so as to ‘invest the subject, not with meaning, but with that which goes beyond and is more significant than meaning’ (Bataille 1983: 95). There is within this concept of the *informe* a deliberate gesture to what Blanchot came later to understand as the second slope of literature and, perhaps of more import, a continued performance of it within Bataille’s writings.

Writing is a performance of the meaningless of life; a life lived and endured and that is transformative. Paradoxically the writer changes through the process of writing – the subject is lost – yet must attempt to communicate and reveal their creative life to others: ‘being in the world is so uncertain that I can project it where I want’ (Bataille 1985: 173). That our lives are transformative marks us as humans as different to beings that can preserve their continued, unchanging self-identity (or *ipséité*).
A being that maintains *ipseité* cannot endure through time – change results in the loss of *ipseité* as fundamental parts – those that make it distinctive as an individual being are replaced. The replacement of too many parts results in the loss of being. Humans however are different; we endure through time even as we change continually. Our identity as human implies a loss of *ipseité* whilst remaining ourselves; what makes us human is this continual, non-catastrophic loss of being/*ipseité*. To be human entails that we are lost even whilst we endure life:

> Being becomes *more* than a fleeting appearance, but the complexity – gradually intensifying – is for this *more* a labyrinth where it losses its way endlessly, is lost once and for all.

Literature, and writing, serves its own ends not ours, it is not the Kantean reflection of thought but a performance and a questioning of being: both ours and its own. As human we are not lost to time but to language and words and the experience, or performance, of writing. To be human requires that we give ourselves and remain true to writing even whilst it calls in to question our very being. Writing as a sacrificial process also calls itself and the limits of language into question. It is a ‘movement away – by language, from language – [that] takes language to what one doesn’t grasp, to what one cannot grasp in language’ (Botting and Wilson, 2001: 41). Literature, and language, perversely betrays itself and reveals itself as inadequate for communication: writing places the subject under erasure whilst outlining its own limits. For Bataille it is not words that communicate experience but silence that conveys and reveals experience that is beyond meaning and form. Silence invokes the *informe*.

An aspect of the *informe* that is particularly apparent throughout Bataille’s work is his continued use of multiple ellipses to designate a collapse of language, a point where the writer runs out of words and, unable to complete their narrative and describe events, lapses in to silence. This stuttering of language breaks the flow of the narrative and undermines meaning yet it is a disjunction brought about not by a passive subject before death (Blanchot) but deliberately by an active one, ‘I have *sought* to speak a language equivalent to zero, a language amounting to nothing, a language returning to silence’ (Bataille, 1973: 25ff, emphasis added). Thus for Bataille the subject seeks their own dissolution in order to understand. Writing is an act of self-subversion (Lala 1995; O’Shea 2001).

Again we say, and ignore this at your peril, there is no complete objective or subjective position in organizational writing; no transcendental, transparent prose, no poetry entirely faithful to what lay prior to thought; induction contaminates, and is contaminated by, deduction. Writing is self-subversion.

*Experiencing dying*

Well I've been bad
And I've been worse
And I'm a creep yeh
And I'm a jerk
C'mon... touch me I'm sick

I won't live long
And I'm full of rot
And I'm gonna give you, boy
Everything I've got

Touch me I'm sick... yeh
Touch me I'm sick

Come on baby, now come with me
You don't come, you don't come
You don't come, you'll die alone
(Touch me I’m sick, Mudhoney, © Subpop 1988)

Bataille demands an active negativity that requires that the writer must accept and seek their own demise in order be creative: we lose ourselves in writing. In her consideration of Bataille’s (1988) ‘The Impossible’ (or *Haine de la poésie*) Marie-Christine Lala (1995: 106) argues that Bataille’s concern is to lay ‘bare the subjectivity which is a problematic feature of man as he confronts his own death and faces it naked’. It is the possible death of the narrator and the narrative as both a loss of an object and subject that suspends meaning where the narrator is a ‘sign of what may be generated by radical absence, from the position of absence that is death’ (Lala 1995: 108). What is surrendered is a claim to durability and transcendence, what is accepted is the potential to create in the interval imposed by a suspension of meaning. Writing requires that we die in order to live: it makes self-sacrifice a possibility for sovereign life.

So where are the writers and presenters of this paper? In a transgressive moment we have chosen to present an alternative that calls our position in, and relation to, our narrative in to question. Sit back and listen – it’s not us that are talking, present in form we say nothing. What you hear is pre-recorded and the *ipséités* that wrote and produced it paradoxically are no more even whilst they endure. Listen to the music that we believe invoke themes of death and the meaninglessness of existence. Listen to the music because it conveys more than our words.

But the music that interweaves around the narration is a digital stream. It is a binary encoding of analogue, continuous waveforms set in motion by the musicians who generated them. Both analogue music and the musicians are absent, their places usurped by a discontinuous stream of information as sound and silence. The writers remain an absent presence whilst the absence of the musicians and analogue sound induce a silence in the cacophony of sound.
In this maelstrom there is the silence of the grave for there remains a concern to lay ‘bare the subjectivity which is a problematic feature of man as he confronts his own death and faces it naked’ (Lala 1995: 106). Life, as Bataille contended, is only a special condition of death and yet one of the limitations of being a human subject is the refusal of our own impending death. The writing of meaningful prose, Blanchot’s first slope of literature, is a demand for meaning and a denial of death. The second slope of writing requires that we confront our limits; it is a death sentence that the writer enacts and communicates. Writing moves between the two, one slope is always present though overshadowed by the other. So far our prose has been theoretical yet death resides at its heart.

In writing this prose we have talked much about death. In considering death as something for analysis we have attempted to pin it to the first slope. It however alludes us even whilst it remains so much part of this piece. We cannot reduce it to meaningful experience, an object for consideration by a reflexive practitioner, because it escapes our understanding whilst remaining present. It is present but remains an experience endured but not understood. It is present in a very real sense for one of us and is another reason for the recorded form of our presentation.

Death becomes us; death is a certainty of life, we are fated to die. For many of us we do not know either the manner or time of our impending demise and in our ignorance choose to ignore it. Ignorance is bliss. What would life be like however when faced with this eventuality? One of us is diagnosed as having inherited genetic emphysema and so has a knowledge of how, if not when, they will die and even the latter is open to statistical conjecture. Three years or twenty seems meaningless if all you do is remain transfixed by the horror of what awaits. So as Bataille contends, find joy in the face of death.

My consultant calls my inherited type ‘dead man walking’ rather evocatively for something that is both terminal and untreatable. Since being diagnosed 15 months ago I’ve read an awful lot about it. Lots of scientific information about the on-going degradation of my lungs; how it’s exacerbated by pulmonary infections that I’m now more prone to because of it; how it may culminate in a fatal pulmonary disease, or perhaps a heart attack or cirrhosis of the liver. I’ve had lots of medical tests that track the progress and scans that even show me what the resulting effects look like. Science is a wonderful thing.

I saw my father die from emphysema three and half years ago, one week before my daughter was born. I’ve joined a web based self-help group for those with the condition and heard many accounts of people’s experiencing of having, or supporting those who have, it. But even though I know how it always ends it is still painful when someone’s communications stops because I know why.

Despite these – both the objective, scientific, technical discourse and the more subjective ones - I still don’t know what it will be like to die. I am developing an understanding of my condition. I know for instance that an English winter is a bad time of year for me now. I have an understanding of what events are likely to exacerbate it and so try to avoid these situations. One is stress and from
experience I get stressed by presentations, interviews and meeting lots of new people. What I have is an on-going experience of something that I endure. I’m not unique in this – I’m just more concerned by and aware of it. But I don’t know what my death ultimately for me will be. What becomes important is how I experience my life and the relationships that I have and value. I’m not transfixed by nor do I deny my death. What I’m interested in is my relationship to my death and my experience of a life that endures.

There is no reflexive position on death. It is something that we experience but cannot know. Yet it something that is always present, albeit so often denied. It both underpins and undermines human experience and permeates our writing. Finally we say, and ignore this at your peril, there is no complete objective or subjective position in organizational writing; no transcendental, transparent prose, no poetry entirely faithful to what lay prior to thought; induction contaminates, and is contaminated by, deduction.

References


