

Marvelous Catastrophes

GEORGE BAKER

I.

"I believe in external (real) chance, it is true, but not in internal (psychical) accidental events."
- Sigmund Freud, *The Psychology of Everyday Life*

Let it be said that the series emerges under the sign of the case study. Each photograph, after all, takes on a name as its name, as if each image were the encapsulation - or perhaps more accurately, the *limit-point* - of a subject, taken in the psychoanalytic sense of the term. And following the goals of the case study, let it be noticed that the series operates under the logic of repetition: as image follows image, one realizes that the series presents permutations on the same thing, that it aims through its various instantiations at the construction of a larger, more general, and single category. The language used to caption each image only mimes this will towards categorization, for it is a language, we note, of statistics, percentage points, ratios, the most banal marks of categorical quantification. The category constructed, however, is paradoxical, in that we are given a generalization, one could say, of that which is absolutely singular, unrepeatable, contingent: the accident as event, and the category of person inclined towards such events.

Under Nancy Davenport's manipulations, these accidents conform mainly to two types. Some few take the form of fortuitous, chance encounters. It is not a question here, however, of the Surrealist marvel that was the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table, but of something a bit more radical, even final: a falling boulder with Leo Bloom's exposed head on a mountainside, an ocean liner with Micheal Scott Keen's rowboat in the Atlantic, Georgina Grayson and a Grizzly bear before a cave. Or rather, we should note that we are presented not with the encounter itself, but with the gap *between* the two objects, a gap that must be described as both spatial and temporal. The other type of accident with which we are presented - and it is much more prevalent within the series - takes the form of a fall. It takes the form of falling, in fact, and again to be more precise, as we see not the completed act but so many women (and a few men) in the process of plummeting, or teetering upon the verge of doing so, pressed close, dangerously close, to the edge of precipitous cliffs.

Listen to Freud on falls, on what he calls - but it seems an understatement while contemplating Nancy Davenport's work - "bungled actions": "Falling, stumbling and slipping need not always be interpreted as purely accidental miscarriages of motor actions. The double meanings that language attaches to these expressions are enough to indicate the kind of phantasies involved, which can be represented by such losses of bodily equilibrium."¹ Freud remembers several hysterics whose symptoms seemed to set in after a fall, as if the shock of the fall was the trauma at the base of their illness. But couldn't it be, he asks, that the fall was already itself a symptom of a deeper underlying sexual fantasy, one at the base of both the fall and the illness together? That the fall might be a form of expression given to the sexual fantasy - a displaced but not fully acting out of desire? After all, Freud concludes, "is not the same thing meant by a proverb which runs: 'When a girl falls she falls on her back'?"

To read Nancy Davenport's photographic scenes as ciphers of erotic desire - for to fall, to crash, to collide is, after all, another form of desire for *contact*, that which erotic desire too usually seeks - to read them as such would be, I think, a simplification, especially considering the immensity of the accidents depicted. But it would also minimize the effects of the repetitive sequencing of these events, of what might be read as their logic of repetition in the service of categorization, or at least the trappings of categorization, that I have pointed to above. Freud did, in fact, posit a double logic

to accidental events, especially grave ones, in that they did not always serve the representation of erotic desire - they could also, and obviously be read as deeply intertwined with a subject's will toward self-injury, self-punishment, indeed self-destruction. He was even led, with typical insight, to speculate upon an historical difference between archaic and modern social life that would depict the entire emergence of a category of people such as the "accident-prone" as a compensatory operation in the face of a type of excessive expression of self-injury - an excess that rationalized modern social life would no longer allow: "In the present state of our civilization self-injury which does not have total self-destruction as its aim has no other choice whatever than to hide itself behind something accidental or to manifest itself by imitating the onset of a spontaneous illness. Formerly self-injury was a customary sign of mourning; at other periods it could express trends towards piety and renunciation of the world." ²

Nancy Davenport's repetitive mise-en-scene of the accident- a type of repetition of the unrepeatable- follows a logic that needs still further elucidation. For, I would insist, it is in this repetition- a repetition of accidental events both within the individual narratives of the subjects' compulsive lives as much as within the larger unfolding of the photographic series itself- that one finds both the uneasy humor of these scenes and their initial impact, even what we could call their aesthetic force. Within the psychoanalytic hermeneutic, Freud did of course present us with many prototypes of the experience, and moreover the enactment of repetition. None of them as compelling, perhaps, as Freud's attempted explanation- within his famous meditation on the death drive, the "beyond" of the pleasure principle- of a little game played by his infant grandson in the crib. It was, in fact, the very first game invented by this one-and-a-half year old child. *Fort*, the infant seemed to say, "gone," throwing a spool attached to a string over the edge of his crib so that he could no longer see it. *Da*, he then exclaimed, "there," reeling in the spool, hailing its joyful reappearance before his eyes. This, of course was repeated indefinitely, a game of the most compelling kind for the child. Here Freud sees an attempt, on his grandson's part, to master, actively, a situation that he earlier had to endure passively: the loss occasioned by his mother's leaving him alone in the crib. It was if he were playing by repeating, again and again, a situation of extreme unpleasure - but, in Freud's view, it was now the child who was sending his mother away, throwing her effigy, the spool from view, and then bringing it back under his own masterful command.

With this interpretation, Jacques Lacan - in his own meditation on chance, causality and repetition- cannot agree. The suffering infant, he asserts, looks not through the door through which the mother disappeared, as if he were expecting her imminent return. Rather, his attention remains riveted much closer to his own person, upon the "gap", ever-open, introduced by her first move away from him. And into this gap will fall not the mother - nor her face in effigy, the little spool-as-mother - but a cotton reel *linked to the infant by the thread he holds*. This spool, in fact, is an object that is merely an extension of the subject itself. And thus, we see in the *fort-da* game, Lacan insists, an enactment of "self-mutilation." The infant, if it wanted his mother's return, could of course simply cry. Instead, it enacts that which it cannot help but enact, its own splitting in the face of the mother's departure. "For the game of the cotton-reel," Lacan explains, "is the subject's answer to what the mother's absence has created on the frontier of his domain- the edge of his cradle - namely a *ditch*, around which one can only play at jumping."³ Here, I think, we can begin to locate a logic intrinsic to Nancy Davenport's scenes - to their repetition, to their fixation on the sign of *falling* as that which is repeated - and that adds a new dimension, a new meaning, to my earlier description of these images as the *limit-point* of their subjects. Perhaps the limit-point of the subject can only be represented as catastrophic.

II.

"Until further notice, anything that can delay the categorization of beings or ideas - that can, in a word, maintain ambiguity - has my full approval."

- André Breton, *Les pas perdus*

Let it be remembered that we are dealing with a form, for the most part, of landscape photography. And thus with what is, historically, one of the most debased, instrumentalized genres of photographic activity. Along with the portrait photograph, no other photographic genre has so intrinsically involved in roping the aesthetic to the bourgeois empirical drive to categorize and to control, to record archivally that which was soon to be lost (unmarked stretches of nature) and simultaneously to map that which was to be produced as lost in this very imaging. In terms of photographic history, we are in the presence of the very essence of the categorical, with all its conflicting imperatives.

But Davenport's landscapes, it must be registered, are often of the most unusual sort. With the majority of the photographs, we are presented with what must be called a vista, a view, framed to one side by cliffs of an often incredible precipitousness, plunging on the other side into a depth of view that is often, quite simply, breath-taking, in the literal sense of the word. The collision of the two - precipitous cliffs pushed up close and dark against the observer, along with luminous rushes into the immensity of visual space - seem purposefully designed to present us with landscapes that retain a measure of excess. As if no matter what the history, even the conventionality, of landscape's instrumentalization, the presentation of certain arrangements to an observer could still surpass that very banalization. As if one could rend a hole in the very midst of photography's own deepest involvement in the processes of categorization.

One could of course invoke here, as a tradition upon which Davenport draws, the whole discourse upon the Sublime, from Burke to Kant to the Romantics. And one would not be very far off, witnessing these scenes of self-destruction in the face of the overwhelming immensity of the natural world, an immensity that repeatedly dwarfs the scale of those humans represented within it, and that evidently effects them so violently. But perhaps the discourse on the Sublime, in this case, should be regarded as only a subset of a much more general category of aesthetic response, one closer to the legacy of Surrealist activities that for some time has been at the basis of Davenport's own photographic endeavors.

This form of experience takes the name of wonder, which the Surrealists came to call and to theorize as the "marvelous."⁴ Wonder, as Stephen Greenblatt has explained, opens up out of a view of the world "not in stately and harmonious order," but in "a succession of brief encounters, random experiences, isolated anecdotes of the unanticipated." In its opening onto the absolutely unknown, wonder effects not an immediate cognitive response, but one that is at first somatic, felt in the very depths of the body. Intense wonder, Greenblatt continues, can only be experienced as something like "the 'startle reflex' one can observe in infants: eyes widened, arms outstretched, breathing stilled, the whole body momentarily convulsed." And in its opening onto this radical novelty, onto this convulsion, the object of wonder, "at least for a moment...is alone, unsystematized, an utterly detached object of rapt attention." The effect: "wonder depends on a suspension or failure of categories and is a kind of paralysis, a stilling of the normal associative restlessness of the mind."⁵

For the Surrealists, nothing could spark this desired response more than the mode of experience they called the encounter. And for the Surrealists these encounters were often played out on the very field of the categorical, to open these categorical givens up to the new from within. This activity was marked by Surrealism's obsession with instrumentalized images from the scientific diagram to the criminal portrait, an obsession not far from Davenport's own deployment of the landscape genre. We have already had reason to remark upon the types of encounters Davenport's photographs put into play: between imposing landscapes and receding vistas, between these natural scenes and intense images of human destruction. (For example, consider *Ruth Ellis*, frozen in mid-fall, in mid-flight, an image of the type of visual paralysis that Andre Breton deemed crucial to the marvelous, that he

dubbed its “fixed-explosive” aspect, and that seems to be, in its stop-motion precision, that activity most characteristic of photography itself.)⁶ But then too there are those scenes, already discussed, that form themselves around the imminent onset of a deathly encounter, picturing forth only the slight but radically frozen gap separating that death from occurring before our startled eyes.

One final encounter promised by the series as a whole lies on the level of the format of each image. For as each photograph frames its vertiginous view onto a deathly landscape, it finds itself accompanied, as if mimicking an allegorical subscript, by a delicate stream of text flowing beneath it. But here, too, perhaps it is a question of a missed encounter, as one’s attention is more than anything else riveted to the gap, once again, that separates out the text from the image, the white strip of empty space, the black edge of the photographic frame, corralling both image and text into their own separate domains. These textual fragments attempt to elaborate various narratives, their temporal unfolding during the process of reading clashing with the extreme intensity, the frozen, immediate stillness of the photographic image above. They attempt, too, to anchor each image - or perhaps to enact the parody of that anchoring - presenting us with information that the mute image above cannot provide, submitting each subject to the discourse of numbers, identifying features, and categorization that Davenport’s series seems everywhere to court.

In the light of this last encounter, perhaps the bewildering scene imaged forth in each photograph - the stop-action gap before literal catastrophe, the repeated experience of free fall - must be read as a particular enactment of the photograph’s capacity to hold out against both category and caption, against both the movement toward generalization and the immobilizing desire for semiotic anchoring. It is as if whatever wonder these manipulated images do provoke, leads on, at the same time, to a knowledge beyond - but conveyed by - their initial capacity to shock. In this light, Nancy Davenport’s entire *Accident-Prone* series might best be read as a subtle meditation upon, even an allegorization of, the medium and properties of photography itself. Not of its essence or ontology - the photograph has none - but of its capacity to escape precisely this prison house, of its ability to image forth less the contingency of the catastrophe, but the absolute catastrophe of the contingent, the particular, the unsystematizable. In doing so, in enacting a series of catastrophic encounters and falls on a level beyond that of the mere image, “Accident-Prone” presents us with an allegorization of photography as Roland Barthes once proposed to study it: an allegory of photography confronted as a *wound* .

¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), p.227.

² Freud, p. 232.

³ For this interpretation of the *fort-da* game, see Jacques Lacan, “Tuché and Automaton,” *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981), pp.62-63.

⁴ I come to this idea through the recent work and slide lectures of Rosalind Krauss on Surrealism. Krauss has also used the discourse on wonder to open up a new reading of the photographs of Louise Lawler, see her “Louise Lawler: Souvenir Memories,” *A Spot on the Wall* (Munich: Munich Kunstverein, 1996); the essay was reprinted in *Aperture* 145 (Fall 1996), pp. 36-39, unfortunately without the concluding excursus on wonder, however.

⁵ For all of these citations, see the introduction to Stephen Greenblatt’s *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), an account that again I come to through Krauss’s mediation.

⁶ On this desired paralysis, Breton wrote: “The word ‘convulsive,’ which I use to describe the only beauty which should concern us, would lose any meaning in my eyes were it to be conceived in motion and not at the exact expiration of this motion. There can be no beauty at all, as far as I am concerned - convulsive beauty - except at the cost of affirming the reciprocal relations linking the object seen in its motion and in its repose.” See *Mad Love*, translated by Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), p.10.