Two Gardens: An Experiment in Calamity Form

Anahid Nersessian

That inveterate formalist Karl Marx (1932, 1: 77) thought a lot about poetics—about how things are whittled into shape through "the expenditure of the human brain, nerves, muscles, sense organs, etc." Labor makes "the form of wood" into a table. Circulation makes the form of the table into a commodity. Capitalism makes the form of the commodity into a magician's magic hat: "the products of men's hands" go in, and "the phantasmagoric form of a relation between things" comes out (ibid., 1: 78).[1] Political economy is endlessly iterative because it is so skilled in "the derangements of poetic form"; with ease it goads life to start or jump "out of its embodied form" and into the figurative idiom of value, cost, and worth (Wolfson 2006: 4). The locus classicus of such derangement is Marx's image of a wooden table. Hewed by the commodity form, the table "not only stands with its feet on the ground, but in relation to all other commodities . . . stands on its head," an absurdist icon of mid-Victorian industry and an oblique philosophical gag (Marx 1932, 1: 76).

Bill Brown (2003: 28) succinctly explains that this strange image

[1] In recognition of the commodity form's capacity for poesis, Jacques Derrida (1993: 252) offers the word *phantasmopoétique* as a synonym for the magical quality that Marx characterizes as "phantasmagoric."

Thanks to Brian McGrath and Maureen McLane for their insightful comments on this essay in its earlier form as a series of talks.

Modern Language Quarterly 74:3 (September 2013)
DOI 10.1215/00267929-2153482

"is Marx's way of representing a metaphysical condition as a physical event." Students of Romanticism will have recourse to a slightly different understanding of the process, whereby a sensible thing is "transmuted into a sensuous suprasensible thing" (Marx 1932, 1: 76).[2] The commodity form is natural supernaturalism at its most brash, an emblem for "the secularization of . . . theological ideas" through their sublimation into material objects (Abrams 1971: 12).[3] For the Romantics, those objects were supposed to be rocks and trees. Lately, however, the exemplary site of the naturally supernatural—of things we cannot see or touch subsumed into things we can—has shifted outward into the nebulous space of climate. There the sensuous suprasensible thing called climate change lurks, making itself known in our immoderate perceptions of a transformed and transforming nature (too hot, too dry, too acrid, too ablaze). As the commodity form injects metaphysical properties into the physical event of industrial production, so too the incorporeal event of ecological calamity takes root in, shapes, and animates the physical world.[4]

As Timothy Morton (2007, 2010) has frequently pointed out, the sensuous suprasensible or "ambient" characteristics of our environment demand to be engaged on their own terms, via criticism capable of moving between what can and what cannot be seen, tracked, or measured. When it comes to the literary study of global warming and other

[2] Marx's original text reads "verwandelt . . . sich in ein sinnlich übersinnliches Ding." The noun phrase is commonly translated as "a transcendent thing," "a thing which transcends sensuousness," or, in Celeste Langan's (1995: 61) words, "a sensuous non-sensuous thing." My translation approximates Langan's, but I render this important phrase even more literally to retain the suggestion that the commodity is at once immanent in the world and beyond what the senses can apprehend.

[3] That the confluence of the sensible and the suprasensible in some way is sacrilegious or tends toward a secular revision of theological ideas is underscored in *Faust* when Mephistopheles mocks Faust as an "übersinnlicher sinnlicher Freier" (suprasensual, sensuous lover) (Goethe 2000: 103). As Gilles Deleuze (1967: 20) points out, in this instance *übersinnlich* "is not 'suprasensible,' it is 'supersensual,' 'supercarnal,' conforming with theological tradition where *Sinnlichkeit* denotes the *flesh*, *sensualitas*."

[4] This simple analogy underscores the necessity of theoretical as opposed to empirical treatments of real suprasensible things, like industrial capitalism and climate change. Yet it also implicitly asserts the causal relationship between the former and the latter. Although calamity continues to crowd capital out of academic discourse, their interdependence need be neither overlooked nor disclaimed.

catastrophes, the necessity of evolving such a criticism is acute. Scholars in historical fields are presented with a peculiar variation on this dilemma, especially if, like Romanticists, they share their period with the Anthropocene, the time when human activities began to impact the earth in manifestly disastrous ways (Crutzen 2002). Did Romantic writers know that their planet was changing? Certainly. Did they know that humans were agents of the change? Perhaps. Did they predict or sense global warming *avant la lettre*? Probably not. In short, Romanticists are now in a position, with respect to the Anthropocene, similar to the one in which Michel Foucault (1976) put all of us with respect to homosexuality, wondering when it first became possible to say "so *that's* what that is."

One of this essay's basic claims is that a vital and lucid interest in the historical ontology of global warming is liable to produce a backward-running version of the phenomenon known as dynamic nominalism. Ian Hacking (2002: 48), who coined that term, argues that "categories of people come into existence at the same time as kinds of people come into being to fit those categories, and there is a two-way interaction between these processes." As we become the kinds of people who know intimately the sensuous suprasensible ruination of our climate, those of us who study the past project this category of experience onto the people we find there, especially when the past in question is ecologically continuous with our own. Thus Tobias Menely (2012: 479) calls for "cultural historians and critics . . . to reshuffle long-standing periodizations" to account for the difference between "the culture of the Holocene, the twelve-thousand-year era of relative climatic stability in which human civilization developed, and the culture of the Anthropocene." Menely's case in point is William Cowper's 1785 poem *The Task*, some of which was written while a toxic cloud of ash, released by the eruption of Iceland's Laki volcano on June 8, 1783, hovered over Britain. While "we now know" that the eruption "had a natural cause," Cowper "came to regard the atmospheric turmoil as a symptom of modern time" (ibid.: 480). As Menely points out, the poet's letters show his resistance to interpreting the cloud as a symptom of anything; all the same, the second book of *The Task*, "The Time-Piece," yokes a slew of natural disasters to the perpetuation of the Atlantic slave trade. From our present point of view, "The Time-Piece" looks like a self-correction

and an epiphany, and Cowper like the sibyl whose cave is (or seems to be) discovered in the opening pages of Mary Shelley's *Last Man*.

Insofar as the Laki eruption, the Calabrian earthquakes of 1783, and the Great Meteor of August 18 that year have no causal link either to industrialization or to slavery, the epiphany is false. This is not an objection but a prompt for discussion. Scholars have long and rightly evaded the conservative bromide that because some epistemic category did not exist "back then," it is dishonest to apply it transhistorically. Yet one feels the need to be cautious. As soon as we situate all writing about environmental disaster, whether natural, man-made, or both, within an Anthropocenic context, we become paranoid readers, agents of a "future-oriented vigilance" that forces *then* and *that* into a mimetic relationship with *now* and *this* (Sedgwick 2002: 130). Though by no means inherently wrong, paranoia participates in a mode of preemptive inquiry whereby an explanatory structure regulates what can be seen and said about a textual artifact, a historical event, or a physical world. Natural theology provided Cowper with one such structure, and certain tendencies in ecocriticism make way for another.

There are good reasons for a paranoid reading practice prompted by an essentially activist impulse. After all, government inaction and human incredulity are compounding our planetary crisis. But literary criticism, whatever its aspirations, is not public policy. If scholars of historical texts want something to say about ecological catastrophe, are they bound to disseminate proof of its existence? Is ecocriticism bound to address contemporary environmental problems even if its primary texts are drawn from a distant historical field? Affirmative answers tie centuries of human economic and agricultural history to the urgencies of the present—by all means, a worthwhile enterprise. Another question posed by this essay is, what is literary criticism, or even literature, good for, other than telling us what we already know?

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (ibid.: 123) traces her critique of paranoia to a conversation with Cindy Patton "in the middle of the first decade of the AIDS epidemic, . . . when speculation was ubiquitous about whether . . . HIV represented a plot or experiment by the U.S. military that had gotten out of control, or perhaps that was behaving exactly as it was meant to." Patton's response to such theories was an arresting amalgam of revelation and shrug:

> I just have trouble getting interested in that. I mean, even suppose we were sure of every element of a conspiracy: that the lives of Africans and African Americans are worthless in the eyes of the United States; that gay men and drug users are held cheap where they aren't actively hated; that the military deliberately researches ways to kill noncombatants whom it sees as enemies; that people in power look calmly on the likelihood of catastrophic environmental and population changes. Supposing we were ever so sure of all those things—what would we know then that we don't already know? (quoted ibid.)

This remark, which seems to flirt with quiescence, is in fact utterly militant. If we disentangle action from the provocation to act or, rather, from "provocation" defined in forensic or evidentiary terms, action becomes simply necessary. We are obliged to act against injustice whether or not it outrages or terrifies us. The puzzle that Patton lays out and whose pieces Sedgwick takes up is how to behave ethically and politically without seeking justification in the scandals of state violence. I do not plan to treat this question explicitly, but, like Sedgwick, I raise Patton's insights into the AIDS crisis and "catastrophic environmental and population changes" to inaugurate an exploration of alternative ways of reading calamity and of evaluating literary knowledge. Works of literature are historical documents, and they do prove things. But what would it mean to perform an ecological critique indifferent to the desire to establish a symptomatic continuity between the past and the present?[5] What interpretive practices would it involve, and evolve? What could these practices add to our habits of reading, teaching, and writing in the Anthropocenic present?

As its title suggests, this essay is an experiment in developing such practices through what I call calamity form. I define form as the contriving of an epistemic disposition toward some imminent content. Calamity form, then, is a poetic technique that shapes the uncertain experience of anticipating, living through, and remembering ecological catastrophe. It allows even evanescent changes in the world to become apprehensible as well as apprehensive—objects of experience and sources of anxiety. Like Marx's commodity form, calamity form reproduces phenomena that are real and intangible, knowable and beyond knowledge. Implicit here is a desire to expand the field of

[5] On the limitations of reading for the symptom see Marcus and Best 2009.

what counts as ecological critique by immersion in the conventions of literary studies, using some of its familiar if slightly antiquated terms. The most prominent of these are imagination and irony, keywords foundational to the invention of Romanticism as a scholarly field. I will proceed by way of a tactical conservatism that exchanges newer categories of analysis for older ones: environment becomes text, materiality becomes tone, life becomes art.[6]

The challenge of reading for calamity is to sustain a nonanticipatory, antisymptomatic relation to the text at hand. In this essay I focus on two occasional poems—by Cowper and by the artist Derek Jarman—that are motivated by calamities both major and minor. My purpose is to inhabit Cowper's and Jarman's configurations of the "nescience" of traumatic knowledge (Hartman 1995: 537) without positing either a historical or an allegorical relationship between their traumas and those of the twenty-first century. Nescience, or not knowing, greets disaster by assuming unexpected rhetorical postures that approximate Patton's agnostic militancy. Refusing the vatic license to place past, present, and future in a linear relation, nescience gives itself up to a temporal disorder that is the special effect of calamities and their form. Such disorder need not be disabling. Because it "clears up doubt but not to the benefit of a certainty" (Barthes 2002: 220), nescience might facilitate the imaginative innovation necessary for remaking the bond between surety and knowledge and, again, between knowledge and action.[7] Nescience might help develop a critique that "adds reality" to

[6] Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2008) suggests that the materiality of a text is in fact constitutive of its tone.

[7] In a characteristically cryptic entry in his *Journal de deuil* (*Mourning Diary*), Barthes (2009: 127) aligns the Zen Buddhist notion of satori with a "clear affirmation of a radical apophasis, the way of a lived intellectual *nescience*." Both *Le neutre* and *L'empire des signes*, where *satori* is glossed as "loss of meaning," note that "Westerners cannot translate [*satori*] except by way of vaguely Christian words (*illumination*, *revelation*, *intuition*)"—to which we should add *apocalypse* as a term whose frequent application to ecological calamity invites similar comment. By contrast, the "shattering of knowledge" that is the object of Zen practice loops satori and nescience together in an interlocutive dynamic aimed at producing the "beside-the-point answer" to a difficult case (koan) (Barthes 2002: 161; 1970: 99). This essay, meanwhile, is part of a larger project engaged in imagining how both art and activism might experimentally be construed as beside-the-point answers to the difficult case of world-historical disaster.

ecological and political facts (Latour 2004: 232) by taking nescience as one of their constitutive elements.

A form is an adjustment. To adjust something is to bring it close to something else, and one thing that form does is to bring experience close to its representation in language. *Experience* could mean the experience of history (call it narrative), the experience of an idea (call it cognition), the experience of being alive (call it phenomenology). We hear the word *just* inside *adjustment*, but to say that form adjusts experience to its representation is not to say that it makes these things equal, or even similar. What it does is to put them in a relation whose asymmetry is in some way noteworthy. This asymmetry is called *irony*, and although this familiar, foggy term tends to attract modifiers like *strange*, *melancholy*, and *cruel*, the turn to form is inherently optimistic. The desire for form evinces a belief that even the effort to gauge loss repairs a few of its injuries or at least makes them bearable. To bear with some state of affairs means to accept a distension in our category of what is normal and to insist that this new normal will hold up against continued pressures.[8]

Irony is the sense of surviving adjustment, and survival *is* often strange, melancholy, and cruel. This seems to be the argument of Cowper's short ballad "The Rose," which the poet composed prior to the eruption of Laki and mailed to a friend on the day that it blew. The poem's relation to that particular calamity is entirely coincidental. It cannot be said to reflect on Laki's implications, symbolic, climatological, eschatological, or other. Nor can it be read as an allegory for the ruin of the natural world attendant on industrialization. Finally, while it implicitly contrasts roses grown outdoors to those bred in the hothouse, the ballad appears isolated from the horticultural history behind the "multi-natural" and often moribund ecologies of the Enlightenment (Bewell 2009). Cowper's rose goes extinct not because it belongs in a different clime but because of a simple act of human carelessness.

> The rose had been wash'd, just wash'd in a shower,
> Which Mary to Anna convey'd.
> The plentiful moisture incumber'd the flower,
> And weigh'd down its beautiful head.

[8] On the new normal see Massumi 2005: 31.

> The cup was all fill'd, and the leaves were all wet,
> And it seem'd to a fanciful view,
> To weep for the buds it had left with regret
> On the flourishing bush where it grew.
>
> I hastily seiz'd it, unfit as it was,
> For a nosegay, so dripping and drown'd,
> And swinging it rudely, too rudely, alas!
> I snapp'd it, it fell to the ground.
>
> And such, I exclaim'd, is the pitiless part
> Some act by the delicate mind,
> Regardless of wringing and breaking a heart
> Already to sorrow resign'd.
>
> This elegant rose, had I shaken it less,
> Might have bloom'd with its owner awhile,
> And the tear that is wip'd with a little address,
> May be follow'd perhaps by a smile.
> (Cowper 1967: 355)

Kevis Goodman finds in *The Task* a diffused, somatic awareness of historical processes, like imperialism, that are too vast to experience firsthand. Her exemplary interpretation of Cowper's feel for the "almost-but-not-quite-present," along with Mary Favret's virtuosic discussion of the poem alongside the world wars of the eighteenth century, is to be credited with the surge of interest in Cowper as an astonishingly mantic observer of Romantic modernity (Goodman 2004: 97; Favret 2009: 53–82). The five pithy quatrains of "The Rose," however, are not of the same order as *The Task*, nor do they engage thematically the "portentous, unexampled, unexplain'd" phenomena that make that poem so, well, portentous (Cowper 1967: 147). "The Rose" tells a story about upset and adjustment so minor as to embarrass the poet who wrote searingly of a "world that seems / To toll the death-bell of its own decease" (ibid.). That world is yet living, but the rose, once cut, does not bloom for long. It begins to die when Mary plucks it; the speaker only finishes the job. The poem shifts incrementally to accommodate this modest act of destruction, letting the barely audible labor of those two half-rhymes imply something both awry and all right. They provide a light sonic comment on the narrative of lost time and alternative futurity, in which one might have done something different but only to

trivial effect. Hence the weak aphorism that closes the last stanza and that subordinates the episode of the rose to an uninteresting remark on how best to elicit a smile.

"The apparent resignation to aphorism," writes Paul de Man (1984: ix), "is often an attempt to recuperate on the level of style what is lost on the level of history." Here de Man (ibid.) is comparing his melancholic mode of reading to the confidence "of those who can continue to do [historical criticism] as if nothing had happened in the sphere of theory." Cowper's closing aphorism is also motivated by resignation. Read with de Manian eyes and ears, the last word of the penultimate stanza inevitably splits into two parts, *re* and *signed*.[9] The word's legacy is one of keeping accounts. Through resignation, a mark (or signum) may be struck out and therefore canceled by another mark. De Man seems to have exactly this notion in mind when he claims that style, which tries to remedy deconstruction's blow to history's authority, ends up negating both itself and the possibility of historical knowledge: plus, minus, zero. In "The Rose" resignation sits between the poem's diegesis and its loosening into a series of hypotheticals. What the speaker has done gives way to what the rose might have done, and to what might happen if one were to wipe away a tear just so.

Between fact and hypothesis is nescience. If resignation is a zero-sum game, nescience is the epistemic condition at which we arrive when we attempt to re-sign or balance out real and conjectural events. A point of equilibrium between experience and speculation, nescience still cannot "master the split" between them (Hartman 1995: 545). Instead, it contemplates the impossibility of knowing how behaving differently in the past would have made a difference in the future. To put it another way, nescience is the cognitive expression of irony: the painful or unsettling sense that there is no meaningful link between what is known and what can be known, or what has taken place and what might take place. Consider the fait accompli of being "*already* to sorrow resign'd" hovering over the conjectural optimism of the poem's last four lines. Together, the sense of surety connoted by *already* and the intensified doubt of *had*, *might have*, *may be*, and *perhaps* create the failed—which is to say, the ironic—adjustment native to calamity

[9] I am grateful to Brian McGrath for putting the question of resignation to me in these terms.

form. The poem, which follows upon the disappearance of this single blip of beauty from the world, must occupy narratively the uninhabitable time when it was still around, as well as the equally impossible future when it might have bloomed a little longer. The poem's present, then, confronts the prospect of a future aftermath in which things will not be beautiful anymore and there will be no room for nosegays, singsong, and a minor aesthetics of pretty objects.

Ecotheorists often ask us to picture a world without people. In our inevitable failure to sustain this suspension of disbelief, we are meant to confront the limits of our flawed, unecological thinking and to compensate for what we cannot experience imaginatively with what we can experience emotionally—a vertigo of dread that will always dissolve in the realization that we are not there yet. Without sounding a single apocalyptic note, "The Rose" offers a vision of the future that may be even less forgiving. The poem uses its nescience to describe living in a present of accelerated loss cloaked in the supposititious language of alternative pasts and futures. It is willing to reside in the loss of the solitary flower and to give shape to the shadow image of a time when it might have gone on living. Thus "The Rose" is not an allegory but an example, documenting and acknowledging guilt for a negligible change in the rose population. Written as both Laki and the Industrial Revolution were brewing, the poem, which knows nothing about either of them, carves out a pocket of alternative awareness alongside the modernity that is Cowper's preoccupation. Here the punctual impacts of catastrophe that *The Task* registers appear as the ongoingness of calamity, as a perennial crisis obtruding into the suburban innocence of Cowper's everyday life. *The Task* shows that such innocence never existed in conventional terms, that it was always attuned to the geopolitics of the late eighteenth century.[10] With none of that poem's evangelical certainty on which to rest its view of the meaning of natural disaster, "The Rose" aggressively holds its speaker accountable not for destroying the rose but for interfering with the possibility that it will live.

With its polemical aims, "The Time-Piece" requires a more straightforward presentation of the link between human iniquity and natural disaster: "Such evil sin hath wrought; and such a flame / Kindled in

[10] What Cowper calls his "loophole of retreat," Goodman persuasively casts not as an escape from history but as an idiosyncratic opening onto it.

heaven, that it burns down to earth" (Cowper 1967: 102). The second book of *The Task* is essentially a theodicy, and while it may suffer from the vertigo of historical consciousness that Goodman etiologizes, it does have a good idea about why earthquakes and tsunamis happen. "The Rose," by contrast, mimics calamity by crossing real with hypothetical events. It uses poetry to shape the inchoate experience of living through what has and has not happened, what may or may not be. By foregrounding the indeterminate link between actions and consequences, this minor poem produces a compelling argument about form in general. It is only through the "little address," the pressing and pushing of formal devices, that accidents seem significant or prophetic. Form exerts the contextual pressure that can turn an event into a signal, from an uninformative to an informative occurrence.[11] Is a student scratching his head, or raising his hand? Is the cyclist stretching, or announcing a left turn? Is breaking the rose a throwaway blunder, or one of those countless, cumulative acts of environmental destruction whose effects are but temporarily delayed?

Sometimes events become signals only in hindsight. In a controversial essay on disco and the AIDS crisis, Walter Hughes (1994: 154) observes how certain motifs in song lyrics—"the 'night fever,' the 'boogie fever,' the 'tainted love,' and the 'love hangover'"—became "rife with proleptic ironies" after the epidemic had begun in earnest. Today "The Rose" has a proleptic cast all its own, the result of a climatological, rather than an epidemiological, state of affairs that forces its metaphors to "pass . . . into literalism" (ibid.: 155). Yet, if the figurative contents of the disco smash and the forgotten poem harden, in hindsight, into something like fact, their formalism leaves them open to registering a very different kind of historical experience. Dense, repetitive, stubborn, the disco beat is fixed to its present even as its metaphors of plague haunt ours. Limber and loose, the poem tunes in to the epistemic and experiential questions posed by disaster, questions not answered but amplified by the poem's own unraveling.[12]

[11] The distinction between events and signals will be familiar to readers of Ferdinand de Saussure and other structural linguists. Despite the obsolescence of structuralism in literary studies, the Saussurean idiom of events and signals still obtains in cognitive science.

[12] For Anne-Lise François (2008: 161), Romantic "weather-reporting" offers to "define a non-appropriative relation to the natural world as one not based on the

As I follow calamity form into the 1980s and the vortex of HIV/AIDS, I do not intend to conflate ecological with epidemiological calamities, though of course they can be intimately linked. Rather, I want to pursue the poetry of nescience in the work of Cowper's fellow poet and gardener, Derek Jarman, best known as a visual artist and a filmmaker. As Daniel O'Quinn (1999: 123) persuasively links Jarman with Oscar Wilde through a queer genealogy of "being-in-common," so I bring Jarman and Cowper together in the name of horticultural critique. Their garden poems uncover neither an unreflective nostalgia for pastoral life nor a celebration of enclosed space. Like "The Rose," Jarman's poems negotiate calamities personal and global by laminating ordinariness atop abnormality. In his garden, sown in the shadow of a nuclear power plant, they seek imaginative acts capable of joining these disparate registers of encountering the world.

Jarman's journal entry for April 27, 1989, begins with a quotation from Dorothy Wordsworth: "I never saw such a union of earth, sky, and sea: the clouds beneath our feet spread themselves to the water, and the clouds of the sky almost joined them" (Jarman 1994: 69). Jarman answers this description of a mighty mass of vapors coming off the sea and sliding under Wordsworth's feet with a poem that, like William Wordsworth's (1807) famous lines on daffodils, "set[s] cloud beside crowd so as to model singularity as a way of being numerous" (Levinson 2010: 634). It is this poem, fittingly, that Jarman incorporates into a voice-over near the end of his 1990 film, *The Garden*:

> I walk in this garden
> Holding the hands of dead friends
> Old age came quickly for my frosted generation
> Cold, cold, cold they died so silently
> Did the forgotten generations scream?
> Or go full of resignation
> Quietly protesting innocence
> Cold, cold, cold they died so silently
>
> Linked hands at four AM
> Deep under the city you slept on

---

expectation of one sense 'speaking' to the other, and open to the possibility of an 'ordinary' rather than catastrophic disjuncture between knowledge and consciousness, percept and representation."

Never heard the sweet flesh song
Cold, cold, cold they died so silently

I have no words
My shaking hand
Cannot express my fury
Sadness is all I have,
Cold, cold, cold they died so silently

Matthew fucked Mark fucked Luke fucked John
Who lay in the bed that I lie on
Touch fingers again as you sing this song
Cold, cold, cold they died so silently

My gilly flowers, roses, violets blue
Sweet garden of vanished pleasures
Please come back next year
Cold, cold, cold I die so silently

Goodnight boys,
Goodnight Johnny,
Goodnight,
Goodnight. (Jarman 1994: 69–70)

There are many echoes to hear in "I Walk in This Garden," of *Hamlet* (Shakespeare 1988), of Keats's (1982) "To Autumn," of Shelley's (1977) "Ode to the West Wind."[13] Together they sound forth Jarman's late Romantic attempt to improvise forms for the calamities of AIDS and global warming, to which he refers throughout his journals. As David Simpson (2009: 172) suggests, Romanticism of the horticultural, Wordsworthian stripe is haunted by an obligation "to imagine what we cannot see." For William Wordsworth (and, Simpson notes, for Marx), the injunction to picture forth the suprasensible "is the means of and

[13] The poem closes by riffing on Ophelia's "Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night" and thus by anticipating the speaker's own death: if he is Ophelia, he too will join the flowers he names under the earth, becoming one among innumerable decomposing "sweets to the sweet" (Shakespeare 1988: 707, 712). Meanwhile, Jarman's brooding over the botched cycles of death, life, and the earth's seasons recalls Keats's "where are the songs of spring?" in a more insistent and despairing register, as does his reedy reprisal of Shelley's shamanic commands ("Hear, O hear!" "Be thou me!") and his nervous final couplet (Keats 1982: 23; Shelley 1977: 14, 69–70). On this planet there is no longer a guarantee that, when winter comes, spring will be close behind.

medium for poetry and the mechanism for personification." In a poem like this one, personification helps transmit a Romantic tradition of nescience by helping dramatize failures of alignment between present and impending calamities. Through his tinny, plainspoken, and uncomfortable exhortations of persons and flowers, Jarman helps us see how time—like sexuality, like disease, like nature—is "polymorphous, promiscuous, [and] disobedient" (Dillon 2004: 43).[14] The poem figures future death and future beauty as they creep and swell into the present, where being "passionately militant" (Jarman 2010: 125) demands an attitude toward unseeable things that is at once political, erotic, and epistemic.

"I Walk in This Garden" is a ballad of victimhood rather than victimization. Its "shaking hand" is not the seizing, swinging, snapping hand of Cowper's speaker but the palsied limb of a dying man who rightly blames silence for the anguish of his generation. Here Jarman evokes the SILENCE = DEATH postering campaign that began in New York City in 1987, the rhyme of *cold* with *old* yoking somatic to temporal registers and hinting that the poem's narrative principle is essentially entropic: the body cools, the world cools, and entropy's arrow of time tilts everything forward unto its last. Steven Dillon tends to consider Jarman's films "lyric" insofar as they are antinarrative, but this description does not accommodate their macroscopic awareness of the headlong march of thermodynamics or of contagious disease. Instead, their lyricism, like that of Jarman's poems, is maintained by an interruption of the future-oriented movement of energy and illness through a pose of "resignation." In Jarman's poem as in Cowper's, resignation attempts to balance factual with conjectural knowledge. The status of what has and has not happened is vividly questioned in the fourth stanza. Did Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John lie in Jarman's bed for certain, or does he mean to ask "who lay" there before him?

[14] Jane Gallop's (2011: 88) "queer temporality" is similarly constituted by "indecent, perverse, uncanny encounter[s]" with death and mourning. Gallop attends carefully to the stunning moment in the memorial essay "White Glasses" when Sedgwick reveals that, while writing in anticipation of her friend Michael Lynch's death, she learns that she has breast cancer. "White Glasses" frames a time when "the dead are not yet dead and the living no longer quite living" (ibid.: 109), a disorderly present that creates surprising solidarity between "a queer woman writer" dying of cancer and "the men dying of AIDS" (ibid.: 110).

The question concerns status in a very specific sense. Depending on how we read these lines, the bed is either a "sacred sodomitical space" (O'Quinn 1999: 115) or a figure for a history of transmission, a pandemic in miniature. Of course, it is actually both. The Four Evangelists pass on a deadly virus as they pass on the good news. HIV seems to come to rest in the speaker's body, but it surely has passed beyond the barrier of the poem, handed down along innumerable bloodlines. The logic of contagion ensures that the sentence beginning in the past (*lay*) and ending in the present (*lie*) will resolve in the future tense of terminal illness, with the speaker's body lying low, prone and stiff. Jarman's lines dramatize the impossibility of separating the homophobic rhetoric of so-called risk groups from the anecdotal reality that everyone you know is dying. The "John" who closes the first line of the fourth stanza and the "Johnny" who closes the poem represent these two modes of knowing: the episteme of public health and the episteme of sociability, perhaps of solidarity, respectively.[15] When these collide, pull apart, and collide again, they produce what the poem encodes as political paralysis.

The epidemiological perspective is also the hypothetical one, revealing in the circuit of male bodies a trail of probable infection and transmission. It asks, "Who else lay in this bed? It was these four people, wasn't it?" Meanwhile, the speaker's sexual history limns an experience so distant that it seems positively biblical. Sex is the site of "the prestige of *it happened*" (Barthes 1967: 74), the historical narrative that invokes the language of "myths and early epics" or, in this case, the folkloric tradition of the Gospels and of English poetry. The fourth stanza of "I Walk in This Garden" rewrites the prayer and nursery rhyme known as the White Paternoster (Opie and Opie 1997: 357).[16] We hear another

[15] It is worth noting that *Johnny* remains "the most widespread slang term" for a condom "in British use since the 1940s." The pun offers a reminder, at once bawdy and tragic, that sex is one of the things that Jarman, in his illness, mourns and a name for the possibility that goes to ground with every man who dies. See Tony Thorne's (2007) entry for *johnnie, johnny* in his *Dictionary of Contemporary Slang*.

[16] In the *Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*, the standard version of the Paternoster is given as follows: "Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, / Bless the bed that I lie on. / Four corners to my bed, / Four angels round my head; / One to watch and one to pray / And two to bear my soul away" (Opie and Opie 1997). The significance of this bit of vernacular theology is underscored in *The Garden*, when the poem is read over a staging of the Last Supper.

nursery rhyme in the fifth stanza—"The rose is red, the violet is blue / The gilly flower is sweet, and so are you"—where the declarative innocence of the child's poem "vanishe[s]" into the uncertainty of the speaker's plea that his flowers "come back next year." This is the only stanza in which the subject of Jarman's refrain changes from *they* to *I*, as members of the speaker's frosted generation undergo a transmigration of souls into his "gilly flowers, roses, violets blue." Now they, his dead peers and friends and lovers, are underground. They are both like and with the flowers, in a conventional nod to fallen Greek heroes turned to blooms; instead of hyacinths, narcissi, and anemones, we have the staples of the English garden, of Jarman's garden in Dungeness, Kent.

From "this bed" to flower beds, from a tangle of bodies to a tangle of roots, "I Walk in This Garden" uses metaphor and metonymy to create a confusion of knowledges in a manner similar to "The Rose," with its Barthesian *this happened* sidling up to its melancholy *might-have-been*. If the affect called melancholy, in the context of lyric poetry, "is all but synonymous with formalization" (Pfau 2005: 390), form and feeling alike are punctured by the speaker's inability to produce a clear causal link between his fate and the daisy chain of lost men who have shared his bed. The fragility of poetic form and human emotion in the midst of calamity is expressed by doubt cast on something that should be indubitable: the seasonal, cyclical return of flowers from the frozen ground. The Greek myths of Hyacinth and Adonis suggest that people, like flowers, live on in one form or another, but amid the environmental peril of Jarman's moment faith in metempsychosis does not come so easily. Disease should be the poem's weft and nature its warp; people cannot come back from death, but gardens can. These assumptions, the generic postulates of the long and varied traditions of pastoral, georgic, and landscape poetry, are brought into question by the speaker's ignorance. Will the flowers come back? Can his lovers "touch fingers again"? Who knows, indeed.

In the climactic scene of Jarman's film *The Last of England* (1987), a woman played by Tilda Swinton spasmodically cuts up her wedding dress before a background of oil fires and Blakean "satanic mills" (Blake 1997: 95), while the earsplitting, melismatic wailing of Diamanda Galás keeps pace with the wavering frames of Super 8 film. The camera lingers on the silk roses covering dress and veil, particularly

when the blossoms are menaced by the tips of the woman's scissors, so large as to resemble garden shears. These flowers, like those of "I Walk in This Garden," become, in Dillon's sense, polymorphous. While the poem's roses are like men who are dead and buried, never to resurface, these roses have never even been alive. They figure the impossibility of life, not to mention beauty, in the fiery world that forms the backdrop of this scene. The woman, however, treats them as though they were real. She tries to prune them in an act of hallucinatory horticulture that involves not only getting the roses off her dress but getting herself off the roses. After all, she is part of the ugliness around her, her red hair and flushed face chiming visually with the bloodshot sky. Yet her desperate pruning makes only "a rudimentary division in what is otherwise a field of collapsed differences" (Terada 2011: 280). This is Rei Terada's definition of the Romantic "impasse," the space where it becomes possible to imagine "a world in which futility [is] no longer a reason for not doing something" (ibid.). *Impasse* implies arrested movement, but the woman's *danse macabre* tilts at an eccentric, frenetic angle. Her agitation works as an apostrophe, at once the exemplary trope of futility and the expression of an unceded desire to be "doing something," however absurd or irrational. Herein lies the "optative character" of apostrophe, its attraction to the "impossible imperatives" of bringing the nonliving to life (Culler 1983: 161).

Terada's impasse is the formal manifestation of nescience. Both come to be in response to the negation of difference between meaningful terms. Terada has in mind the distinction between radical, liberal, and conservative politics in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars, but for poets like Cowper and Jarman what is at stake is the nonalignment of experience or knowledge with the future. Whether "resignation" or "collapse," it questions the ground of action conceived in the minimalist terms of "doing something." "Something" might be gardens, poetry, rhetoric, or, as Patton suggests, activism. Each of these activities requires the optative mood: to tend to flowers that may not come back, to write, to speak to and with the dead, to commit to a pursuit of justice that is entirely self-justified.

Derek Parfit (1984) and Caspar Hare (2007) couch the matter in philosophical terms in their studies of the nature of obligation between present, existing persons and future, nonexisting persons. For Parfit,

existence cannot be "what matters" when it comes to determining the scope of ethics, because in matters of environmental policy our present actions constrain the identities of those still unborn. The necessity of making good policy has to be recuperated for reasons underwritten neither by the assumption of who future persons will be nor by our present self-interest. Hare suggests that our obligation to future persons should be understood *de dicto* rather than *de re*: it applies not to concrete, specific persons but to descriptions of possible persons, which is to say, to persons as they exist in language. This last formulation holds particular interest for literary criticism. Jarman's "dead friends" are available to him only through apostrophic address; the same is true of those roses, exhorted to return next year as if they could hear and obey the speaker. A specific form of personification, apostrophe also establishes a relation to human and nonhuman beings *de dicto*. Jarman uses it explicitly in reference to an unknown and frightening future, where humans and flowers will hopefully, optatively, be around to do as the speaker says. More wish than command, the speaker's attempt to communicate with *de dicto* people and plants models an ethics grounded in linguistic and rhetorical desire. It takes Cowper's sad reflection on the might-have-been and captures its latent optimism for the future, even if it is a future that exists in words alone.

To summarize: calamity form works to represent the state of nescience that arises when we try to square real with hypothetical events or, more pointedly, to recuperate what we have done by speculating on what we might have done. It is not a genre or style but an operation performed on language, syntax, and image such that they may stage a very particular kind of intellectual crisis. This crisis concerns, above all, the unknowability of the future and the uncertain impacts of our actions on it. Calamity form is therefore profoundly anxiogenic. It raises the possibility not only that nothing we do matters but that everything we have done has doomed us in large and small ways. Nonetheless, reading calamity form invites us to consider how literature, the zone of *de dicto* par excellence, provides alternatives to the wholesale voiding of imaginative possibilities for future worlds. Nescience does not mark the end of optative thinking but rather is a provocation to it—an apostrophe, as it were, of the mind.

I am wary of calls for literary reperiodization based on the proposition that Anthropocenic modernity dawned in the late eighteenth century. Different times, places, and cultures experience environmental pressures differently, and it is important that we not sublimate their nescience into our knowledge, or their knowledge into our nescience. What does it mean to experience calamity in the absence of a definitive awareness, or even a solid hunch, about what caused it? How does literature give form to doubt, and how does it imagine speaking and acting from a place of uncertainty?[17] Such questions take on a particular tone and texture when the literature in question is *in* the Anthropocene but not *of* it, as Romantic poetry is. As Jonathan Bate (1991) first pointed out, British Romanticism manifests a unique preoccupation with the relationship between human industry and the natural world. There are many reasons for this, the most obvious being the advent of industry itself and the acceleration of the enclosure process; no doubt popular awareness of the long history of the land-grabbing called imperialism also comes into play, as well as the mismanagement of Irish agriculture. I have de-emphasized these contexts here to concentrate on what Romanticism does not know about its history as well as what it does know. It would not undercut Geoffrey Hartman's (1995: 537) argument about trauma to say that history too is "as close to nescience as to knowledge," and just as difficult to bear.

If I am so concerned with the Romantic origin of calamity form, why have I compared a poem by William Cowper to a poem and a film by Derek Jarman, who is less than twenty years dead? Certainly, as his quotation of Dorothy Wordsworth shows, Jarman sees himself in line with Romanticism's horticultural perspective. Nonetheless, my desire to put Jarman and Cowper together has more to do with my method than with the thematic continuity between their work. The special analytic procedure that calamity form invites must be responsive to its peculiar derangements of time and knowledge. Here too I take my cue from

[17] By no means do I advocate denying scientific proof of global warming and its causes, or suggest that literary criticism should turn away from science. Instead, we should consider the possibilities for a criticism that is proactive rather than reactive and that does more than simply invert the insidious pseudoskepticism of climate change deniers.

Jarman, who regarded many of his films as cut-ups in the vein of William S. Burroughs and the Dadaists before him. A cut-up is essentially a parataxis, through which the stark dissimilarities of elements forced into proximity divulge some hitherto occluded relation between them. In his adaptation of *The Tempest* (1979), Jarman switches out the oak in which Prospero threatens to imprison Ariel with a glass coffin, à la Snow White. The scene happens two-thirds of the way through the film, but it is accompanied by lines lifted from the first act of Shakespeare's play: "If thou more murmur'st, I will rend an oak / And peg thee in his knotty entrails." In remixing Shakespeare's dialogue and supplanting his image of an organic tomb with a synthetic one, Jarman undertakes a "constitutive dissociation" (Adorno 1965: 185). The film proposes not that a tree is like a coffin but that Prospero's imperial magic has turned nature into a death trap. The paratactic dissociation of oak and casket reveals the "subcutaneous form" of *The Tempest*, namely, the *longue durée* of empire and its will to "escape from the spell of the domination of nature" (ibid.: 184).

This essay is also a cut-up. It borrows that motif from the poetic and cinematic imagery it engages, from plucked and severed roses to friends mown down by AIDS to violent garden shears. As Jarman's *Tempest* shows, parataxis is never arbitrary; it is designed to disclose the morphological principles of history and historical representation. A formalism committed to parataxis as a method might renew historicist inquiry by rethinking not how we define literary periods but how we put them into conversation with one another. It might borrow from calamity a spell against presentism, encouraging us to suspend our demands for certain knowledge, to adopt the ambiguities and imprecisions of a less assured past and of a future that exists only in language. Here we might take our cue from Friedrich Hölderlin, the great paratactist, who for Theodor W. Adorno exemplifies the capacity of "man" to use language as an "organon of reflection" (ibid.: 206): "Tragen muss er, zuvor; nun aber nennt er sein Liebstes, / Nun, nun, müssen dafür Worte, wie Blumen, entstehn" (He must learn to endure first, but now he names his beloved things, / Now, now, must the words therefore come into being, like flowers) (Hölderlin 1970: 94–95).

Anahid Nersessian is assistant professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University. She has completed a book manuscript tentatively titled *Utopia, Limited* and has published essays and reviews in *Contemporary Literature*, *ELH*, *European Romantic Review*, *Modern Philology*, *Public Books*, and *Studies in Romanticism*. The working title of her second book project is *The Calamity Form*.

References

Abrams, M. H. 1971. *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*. New York: Norton.

Adorno, Theodor W. 1965. "Parataxis: Zur späten Lyrik Hölderlins." In *Noten zur Literatur*, vol. 3, 156–209. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Barthes, Roland. 1967. "Le discours de l'histoire." *Social Sciences Information* 6, no. 4: 65–75.

———. 1970. *L'empire des signes*. Paris: Skira.

———. 2002. *Le neutre: Cours au Collège de France (1977–1978)*. Paris: Seuil.

———. 2009. *Journal de deuil: 26 octobre 1977–15 septembre 1979*. Paris: Seuil.

Bate, Jonathan. 1991. *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*. London: Routledge.

Bewell, Alan. 2009. "Erasmus Darwin's Cosmopolitan Nature." *European Romantic Review* 76, no. 1: 19–48.

Blake, William. 1997. "Milton a Poem." In *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, edited by David V. Erdman, 95–143. New York: Anchor.

Brown, Bill. 2003. *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Cowper, William. 1967. *The Complete Poetical Works*, edited by H. S. Milford, 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Crutzen, Paul. 2002. "Geology of Mankind." *Nature*, no. 6867: 23.

Culler, Jonathan. 1983. *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Deleuze, Gilles. 1967. *Présentation de Sacher-Masoch: Le froid et le cruel, avec le texte intégral de la "Vénus à la fourrure,"* translated by Aude Willm. Paris: Minuit.

de Man, Paul. 1984. *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Derrida, Jacques. 1993. *Spectres de Marx: L'état de la dette, le travail du deuil et la Nouvelle Internationale*. Paris: Galilée.

Dillon, Steven. 2004. *Derek Jarman and Lyric Film*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Favret, Mary. 2009. *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Foucault, Michel. 1976. *La volonté de savoir*. Vol. 1 of *Histoire de la sexualité*. Paris: Gallimard.

François, Anne-Lise. 2008. "Unspeakable Weather, or the Rain Romantic Constatives Know." In *Phantom Sentences: Essays in Linguistics and Literature Presented to Ann Banfield*, edited by Robert S. Kawashima, Gilles Philippe, and Thelma Sowley, 147–61. Bern: Lang.

Gallop, Jane. 2011. *The Deaths of the Author: Reading and Writing in Time*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. 2000. *Faust I: Der Tragödie erster Teil*. Stuttgart: Reclam.

Goodman, Kevis. 2004. *Georgic Modernity: Poetry and the Mediation of History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich. 2008. "Reading for the *Stimmung*?" *boundary 2* 35, no. 3: 213–21.

Hacking, Ian. 2002. *Historical Ontology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hare, Caspar. 2007. "Voices from Another World: Must We Respect the Interests of People Who Do Not, and Will Never, Exist?" *Ethics* 117, no. 3: 498–523.

Hartman, Geoffrey. 1995. "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies." *New Literary History* 26, no. 3: 537–63.

Hölderlin, Friedrich. 1970. "Brot und Wein." In *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, edited by Günther Miethe, vol. 1, 312. Munich: Hanser.

Hughes, Walter. 1994. "In the Empire of the Beat: Discipline and Disco." In *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth Culture*, edited by Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose, 147–57. London: Routledge.

Jarman, Derek. 1994. *Modern Nature*. Woodstock, NY: Overlook.

———. 2010. *At Your Own Risk: A Saint's Testament*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Keats, John. 1982. *Complete Poems*, edited by Jack Stillinger. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Langan, Celeste. 1995. *Romantic Vagrancy: Wordsworth and the Simulation of Freedom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Latour, Bruno. 2004. "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern." *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2: 225–48.

Levinson, Marjorie. 2010. "Of Being Numerous." *Studies in Romanticism* 49, no. 4: 633–57.

Marcus, Sharon, and Stephen Best. 2009. "Surface Reading: An Introduction." *Representations*, no. 108: 1–21.

Marx, Karl. 1932. *Das Kapital: Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*. 3 vols. Berlin: Verlag für Literatur und Politik.

Massumi, Brian. 2005. "Fear (the Spectrum Said)." *positions* 13, no. 1: 31–48.

Menely, Tobias. 2012. " 'The Present Obfuscation': Cowper's *Task* and the Time of Climate Change." *PMLA* 127, no. 3: 477–92.

Morton, Timothy. 2007. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

———. 2010. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Opie, Iona, and Peter Opie, eds. 1997. *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

O'Quinn, Daniel. 1999. "Gardening, History, and the Escape from Time: Derek Jarman's *Modern Nature*." *October*, no. 89: 113–26.

Parfit, Derek. 1984. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pfau, Thomas. 2005. *Romantic Moods: Paranoia, Trauma, and Melancholy, 1790–1840*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 2002. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performance*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Shakespeare, William. 1988. *The Complete Works*, edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, with John Jowett and William Montgomery. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. 1977. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, edited by Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers. New York: Norton.

Simpson, David. 2009. *Wordsworth, Commodification, and Social Concern: The Poetics of Modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Terada, Rei. 2011. "Looking at the Stars Forever." *Studies in Romanticism* 50, no. 2: 275–309.

Thorne, Tony. 2007. *Dictionary of Contemporary Slang*. 3rd ed. London: Black.

Wolfson, Susan J. 2006. "Introduction: Reading for Form." In *Reading for Form*, edited by Susan J. Wolfson and Marshall Brown, 3–24. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Wordsworth, William. 1807. "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud." In *Poems in Two Volumes*, vol. 2, 49–50. London.