

# ■ Discursing on Disaster: The Hermeneutics of Environmental Catastrophe

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## Abstract

How individuals, communities and societies respond to environmental catastrophe, whether in the event or as a potentiality, is crucially informed by the culturally mediated interpretative frameworks within which such disasters are perceived. In this regard, the challenge of confronting ecocrisis is as much hermeneutic and discursive as it is scientific and social, practical and political. Literary and cultural studies have much to contribute towards meeting this challenge through the examination of those interpretative frameworks—variously mythical, religious, philosophical or political in genesis—which could either hinder or enable our preparedness to act effectively and ethically in the face of immanent or unfolding disaster. This will be demonstrated here through a reading of Heinrich von Kleist's short story, "The Earthquake in Chile" (1807). Although the narrative is set in Chile at the time of the massive earthquake that devastated Santiago in 1647, it responds to the philosophical and religious debates concerning the relationship of the divine to nature and society that followed the more recent Lisbon earthquake of 1755. Rather than endorsing unequivocally any one position that was taken in these debates, Kleist undertakes a narrative investigation of the practical and political implications that are shown to arise from differing discursive enframings of environmental disaster. While the catastrophe caused by an earthquake clearly differs from one that is predominantly anthropogenic

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in origin, such as climate change, Kleist's narrative discloses the inevitable entanglement of 'nature' and 'culture', word and world, in the context of environmental disaster.

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*Unser historischer Ort ist dadurch bestimmt, dass wir nicht vor der Umweltkatastrophe stehen, sondern mitten drin.* (Böhme 2002: 261)

“What defines our historical location is that environmental catastrophe does not lie before us; rather, we are standing in the midst of it.”<sup>1</sup>

If this was already true in 2002, when the German philosopher Gernot Böhme made this bleak assessment in his nonetheless remarkably up-beat book, *Die Natur vor uns* (“Nature before us”) – and a good many ecologists and environmentalists would argue that this had been true for at least a decade or more – it is only in the last year or so that the dire condition of our global environment has begun to be more widely acknowledged in the public arena, above all in association with climate change.

Apocalyptic, of course, has always been one of the favored modes of ecological discourse (Garrard 2004: 85-107). Rachel Carson’s vision in her “Fable for Tomorrow” of a town in the heart of America, where, come Spring, no birds sing (Carson 1999: 21-2), is an obvious, and historically influential, example from the early years of the modern environmental movement in the 1960s. Long before this, however, during the Romantic era that is recalled by Carson in her quotation from John Keats’ “La belle dame sans merci” (“The sedge is wither’d from the lake,/And no birds sing”), the emergence of a distinctively ecological view of ‘nature’ as a complex and dynamic network of interrelationships among organisms and the physical environment was coterminous with the recognition of the vulnerability of this network to potentially catastrophic disruption, from the planetary level of Byron’s apocalyptic “Darkness” to the local level of John Clare’s “Lament of Swordy Well.”

For contemporary environmentalists, apocalyptic is both necessary, and necessarily troubling. In Greg Garrard’s assessment, environmental apocalyptic “tends to polarise responses, prodding sceptics towards scoffing dismissal and potentially inciting believers to confrontation and even violence” (Garrard 2004: 105). In some registers, moreover, apocalyptic discourse reinforces what Stephen O’Leary terms a ‘tragic’ “frame of acceptance” (O’Leary in Garrard 2004: 87), within which catastrophe is envisaged as inevitable or even, as in the case of Christian millenarianism and its secular derivatives, as redemptive and, as such, desirable. In other registers, though, where it is directed towards disclosing not what will necessarily come about, but what could result from certain cur-

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own. KR.

rent tendencies, that is to say, where its rhetoric is pitched towards prevention rather than prediction, apocalyptic can act as a powerful motivator of change in the present, as did Carson's *Silent Spring*, for example, in opposition to the use of biocidal chemicals in agriculture.

Hitherto, most evocations of catastrophe within ecocritical literary and cultural studies have been oriented in this direction. The project, broadly speaking, has had an ethical, political and implicitly utopian dimension: by better understanding the role played by sundry socio-cultural factors in driving and legitimating, but potentially also in protesting and redressing environment ills, it was hoped that such research could help to further the cause of ecocultural transformation, which was understood to be necessary to prevent crisis from culminating in catastrophe. Assuming that it might yet be possible to prevent catastrophe from sliding into cataclysm, this project remains a potentially valuable one. Since such changes as are now beginning to occur appear to be too little and too late, however, we are also faced with a new task: namely, the consideration of how we are to comport ourselves within the catastrophic situation that is already upon us.

In the context of climate change especially this task is pressing. While politicians and business leaders continue to quibble over how best to act without harming the blessed economy, scientists insist that it is already too late to avert some degree of climate chaos. Moreover, if, in the absence of a really radical reduction of greenhouse gas emissions,<sup>2</sup> global average temperatures rise above 2°C, the consequent feedback loops could well send them soaring up to 6° or more within the next 100 years. The last time that kind of temperature rise occurred on earth, around 251 million years ago, something like 90% of all species were obliterated (Monbiot 2006: 13). Even if the direst prognoses turn out to be wrong, there is growing agreement among climate scientists that current levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere are sufficient to significantly alter global weather patterns, causing a range of disastrous or even catastrophic events in many regions of the world in the coming decades (Parry *et al.* 2007). Indeed, the growing incidence and severity of what climatologists quaintly call 'weather surprises', such as wind storms, wildfires, floods, temperature extremes, and droughts, suggest that these climatic changes are already underway.<sup>3</sup> Longer-term processes of climatically-driven environmental change are also ineluctably

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<sup>2</sup> As Sharp (2007) points out, if such a reduction were to be undertaken equitably, that is to say, on the 'conversion' model for emissions reduction favored by George Monbiot (2006) and others on transnational social justice grounds, it would effectively spell the end of multinational capitalism.

<sup>3</sup> In 2005 alone, nearly 12,000 human lives are estimated to have been lost and over 153 million people adversely affected by wind storms, wildfires, floods, temperature extremes, and droughts (EM-DAT 2005).

unfolding. These include increasing weather variability, rising sea levels, reduced availability of fresh water, the spread of tropical diseases, and escalating extinction rates.<sup>4</sup> The consequences of such changes will be all the more devastating where they are experienced in combination with other social and environmental stressors, such as military conflict, economic hardship, land degradation and habitat destruction. There is a very real danger, moreover, that these altered climatic conditions could fuel violent conflict over dwindling resources, while certain responses might actually exacerbate global warming, as those of us who are in a position to do so turn up our fossil-fuel-powered air-conditioning to counter the heat, for instance. To make matters worse, some of the touted alternatives to fossil fuels, such as biofuels and nuclear energy, have adverse environmental and/or social implications of their own.

For the ecologically literate, of course, global warming has been a worry for some time. The phenomenon of the Greenhouse Effect was identified by climatologists decades ago. Back in the mid 1990s, Jonathan Bate (1996) showed great perspicacity in urging ecocritics to place their project under the rubric of “Global Warming Criticism.” By contrast with the critical preoccupations of the Cold War period, focussing exclusively on human language, agency and social relations, Bate proposed that Global Warming Criticism would foreground the inextricability of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ as disclosed paradigmatically in the phenomena of weather and climate. In so doing, it would break with what Michel Serres terms the “Modern Constitution” that severed the human from the nonhuman, while determining their relationship exclusively in terms of mastery and possession (Serres 1995: 31-2). Over the past ten years, ecocritical literary and cultural studies have expanded and diversified, acquiring increasing theoretical sophistication in the process. However, few ecocritics have followed Bate’s inspired lead in locating their activity within the horizon of Global Warming. In the interim, this horizon has begun to look ever more ominous: if it is to live up to its promise, Global Warming Criticism must face up to the ineluctability of eco-catastrophe.

You will have noted that having begun by problematising apocalyptic, I have just been engaging in a spot of apocalyptic discourse myself. This is apocalyptic with a twist though: what I am seeking to “unveil” here, by way of contextualising my approach to the literary text that I am gradually sidling up to, is not so much

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<sup>4</sup> According to the most recent IPCC estimate, up to 37% of all endemic species across the globe could be lost by 2050 (Parry *et al.*, 2007, 241). Given that the figures on carbon emissions and global mean temperatures undergirding the IPCC report are already outdated, this percentage, dire though it is, could well be considerably higher.

what will necessarily happen in the future, but rather what is occurring right now. In accordance with the valuable distinction made by Martin Buber, this discursive mode is prophetic rather than apocalyptic: far from enjoining resignation in the face of a future that has always already happened, prophetic discourse issues an urgent call to respond to the exigencies of the current “historical hour” (Buber 1957). Within our own grim historical hour, the most salient fact is that climate change is no longer on the horizon, and possibly preventable: it is already upon us. And, for all the gleeful speculation about new trade routes, fisheries and mineral resources being opened up in the erstwhile frozen north, from the perspective of the global biosphere, including millions of fellow humans at risk from inundation, desertification, famine and disease, it is an unmitigated disaster. In the discourse of climate change policy-making, adaptation is now no less imperative than mitigation: and, in my books, adaptation implies learning how to live equitably and sustainably with ongoing environmental change, while preparing ourselves, as best we can, to respond effectively and humanely to a range of potentially catastrophic extreme weather events.

What role is there for the ecological humanities, and specifically, for ecocritical literary and cultural studies, in all this? Many would be surprised to learn that there was any! Surely, all we need is a well-conceived and properly resourced disaster management system based on the best available scientific assessment of local climate change impacts and social risks, pragmatists argue. Well, yes, we do need that, and ideally it should be oriented towards protecting the most vulnerable sectors of the community, rather than the most privileged. Note, though, that we have already left the relatively safe terrain of scientific risk assessment and pragmatic response, and opened up ethical considerations concerning social justice. Going further down this path, we might also consider whether our disaster management should be confined to protecting our own- locally, regionally and nationally- or whether we should not also be preparing to open our hearts, coffers and even our borders to the millions of environmental refugees that will soon be in need of assistance? And what about the fate of our other-than-human kin caught up in this catastrophe that is so clearly not of their making: should particular animals fighting for their lives in an extreme weather event, or entire species, struggling to survive in changing climes, not also command our ethical concern? If we allow that the most vulnerable might include other-than-human members of the local, regional or Earth community, we are getting into the even trickier territory of transpecies justice (Rose 2006).

Responding to catastrophe, then, encompasses profound ethical and political considerations, as well as technical and organisational ones. The choices that we make in the face of a catastrophic event, moreover, are conditioned by the

meanings that we attribute to it on the basis of inherited cultural narratives. As cultural theorist Stephen Muecke has shown with respect to the impact of Hurricane Katrina: “the stories told about natural disasters are crucial to the organisation of people’s responses in the medium to long term. While the stories of individual events are told in the detail, they are nonetheless already broadly scripted by narrative forms of mythical strength” (Muecke 2007: 260). To this I would add that the manner in which people comport themselves in the midst of a disaster, that is to say, in the immediate as well as in the medium to long term, is likely to be inflected by their horizon of understanding and cultural values, as well as by the character of their social relations and personal virtues (which are themselves perhaps as much acquired as given). Literary and cultural studies therefore do have a valuable task to perform in the present context, namely in the exploration of what I propose we term the hermeneutics of environmental catastrophe.

I have written elsewhere about some of the ways in which one major eurowestern disaster narrative, namely the biblical Flood story, is currently being reworked in a range of contemporary texts in the context of climate change (Rigby 2008). In turning here to a considerably earlier text that is centred around an apparently non-anthropogenic disaster, namely an earthquake, I want to explore a more general question: namely, how can a work of the creative imagination such as this help us to come to grips with the cultural, ethical and discursive factors that shape human responses to environmental catastrophe?

Heinrich von Kleist’s novella “The Earthquake in Chile” (1806) refers explicitly to the massive quake that struck Santiago on May 13, 1647. The consensus among Kleist scholars, though, is that it responds more immediately to the philosophical and theological debates that erupted in northern Europe following the Lisbon Earthquake of November 1, 1755, as well as, somewhat more obliquely, to the French Revolution, the great political rupture of Kleist’s day that was itself frequently likened to a volcanic eruption or earthquake, the salience of the latter metaphor doubtless being enhanced by the still fresh memory of the Portuguese disaster.

The Great Lisbon Earthquake, as it became known, remains the largest seismic event ever recorded in European history. Subsequently estimated to have measured around 8.5 on the Richter scale, its force was felt on land over an area of more than 15 million square kilometres from North Africa to Scandinavia. From its epicentre deep below the ocean around 200 km west-southwest of Cape St. Vincent it sent a series of tidal waves coursing across the Atlantic in all directions, cresting up to 15 metres in southern Portugal where they surged over the seawalls of Cadiz, as well as causing severe damage in Algiers and Tangier, before washing up along America’s eastern seaboard. Although the waters only topped around 6 metres in Lisbon, the largest concentration of casualties was

found here, with around 30,000 people either crushed by falling buildings, many of them in the crowded churches where All Saints' Day celebrations were in process; drowned in the ensuing tsunami; or immolated in the fires that subsequently consumed what remained of the Portuguese capital, then one of Europe's largest and wealthiest cities (Boer and Sanders 2005: 90-98).

The shockwaves that were felt across much of Europe in consequence of this catastrophe were ideational as well as physical. In a striking instance of the entanglement of natural and cultural history, the Lisbon Earthquake is frequently cast as a "turning point" (Weinrich 1971: 65) or "watershed" dividing Europe's past from its future (Araujo 2006: 318). Its force was probably felt all the more powerfully, though, because the grounds of belief were themselves shifting. In 1756, the Prussian Academician and Professor of Medicine and Philosophy, Johann Gottlob Krüger, could no longer count on general assent to his assertion that "all reasonable people consider the fall of Lisbon to be a story in which God played the leading role" (in Breidert 1994: 46). The very fact that Krüger felt called upon to reaffirm his faith in an interventionist and punitive deity in this context indicates that this structure of belief could no longer be taken for granted. Even among those who shared this interpretive schema, Catholics and Protestants were divided as to the intended target of the Almighty's wrath: while the latter pointed the finger at the cruelty and injustice of the Lisbon-based Inquisition, the former pinned the blame on the general immorality and faithlessness that had proliferated along with the worldly wealth of this bustling trading port, in which largely Protestant Dutch and British merchants did lucrative business.

While such rearticulations of earlier theological discourses concerning divine omnipotence served the purpose of shoring up biblical revelation and clerical authority against the rising tide of rationalism—or, as in the case of the Wesley brothers, advancing the specifically Protestant cause (Bassnett)—other responses to the Lisbon earthquake crystallised a range of characteristically modern discourses of 'nature'. Among the most notable of these responses were the technoscientific observations and speculations of Immanuel Kant and John Mitchell, a founding figure in the history of seismology (Boer and Sanders 95); the moral humanism informing Voltaire's rejection of the physico-theological doctrine that ours was, as Leibniz had put it, the "best of all possible worlds"; and the protocologism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's defence thereof. Importantly, all of these positions continue to inform the ways in which modern westernised societies frame and respond to environmental catastrophe. As we will see, Kleist brings a number of these discourses into play in his narrative, but without unambiguously endorsing any one reading of the earthquake. Rather, and to pre-empt my conclusion, in this highly self-reflexive work of literature, Kleist thematises the



very process whereby the discursive construction of a catastrophic event decisively influences the ways in which individuals and groups of people comport themselves in response to it: herein lies the peculiar interest of this literary text within the catastrophic horizon of the new Global Warming Criticism.

Coinciding with the expansion of commercial printing, the Lisbon Earthquake was also a major media event. In addition to the large number of articles that appeared in newspapers and magazines, hundreds of tracts in almost every European language were published, republished and circulated widely in 1755, 1756 and 1757. These included a plethora of hastily written 'event reports' sold cheaply in pamphlet form, generally deploying highly charged language to provide sensationalised descriptions, typically focussing on what were purported to be true stories of bizarre occurrences that befell particular individuals (Araujo 2006: 313-14). It is with just such a bizarre occurrence, albeit reported in an almost exaggeratedly dispassionate style, that Kleist's disaster narrative begins:

In Santiago, the capital of the kingdom of Chile, at the moment of the great earthquake of 1647 in which so many thousands lost their lives, a young Spaniard called Jerónimo Rugera was standing beside one of the pillars in the prison in which he had been committed on a criminal charge, and was about to hang himself.  
(Kleist 1978: 51)

Craftily leaving the reader 'hanging' with regard to what happened next, the narrator proceeds to recount, in a highly economical if significantly less dispassionate manner, how Jerónimo had been brought to this sorry pass. The story is the familiar one of forbidden love between a low-ranking tutor and his high-ranking pupil that had become something of a touchstone for Kleist's generation, following Rousseau's retelling of the medieval epic in the guise of a proto-Romantic manifesto of free love in *Julie, ou la nouvelle Éloïse* (1764). Not only the plot, but also the narrative perspective is emphatically Rousseauian: in referring to the "malicious vigilance" (51) of the heroine's "proud brother" who alerted their "old father" to this unseemly liaison, the narrator seeks to engage the reader's sympathy for the lovers in opposition the prevailing social order that disallows their union.

In characteristically Kleistian manner, though, the conventionalised storyline is radicalised, as the secret tryst between the romantic hero and his beloved, Josefa, in the garden of the convent to which she had been banished by her indignant father, results not merely in an illegitimate pregnancy, but in the scandalous spectacle of a nun collapsing in birth pangs on the cathedral steps in the midst of a Corpus Christi day procession! Both the guilty parties were consequently imprisoned, and, in accordance with conventual law, Josefa was condemned to death at the stake. At the moment when the earthquake struck, then, Josefa was

being led to her execution—albeit by beheading rather than burning, thanks to the Viceroy's accession to the entreaties of her family and the Abbess, "a decision," we are told, "which greatly outraged the matrons and virgins of Santiago" (52). This "spectacle about to be offered to divine vengeance" was nonetheless eagerly being awaited by "the pious daughters of the city," as the narrator puts it with psychologically astute and socially critical irony, who were planning to watch it "in sisterly companionship" from the roof tops that had been rented out for occasion. Jerónimo, meanwhile, as we were informed in the opening sentence, was on the brink of taking his own life.

Amazingly, both the execution and the suicide are forestalled by the earthquake, which not only saves the lovers' lives, but also effects their reunion, in company with their baby boy, Felipe, in the countryside that has survived unscathed the jolt that laid low the town: amazingly, and perhaps miraculously. Jerónimo's escape is initially framed by the narrator as a matter of "chance": the complete destruction of the prison in which he was confined was fortuitously prevented by the "slow fall" of the building opposite, while a gap was torn in the front wall through which the hero "slid" to his freedom, propelled willy nilly back into life by an upheaval emanating from the very womb of the earth. His life is thus restored to him by means of a symbolic re-birth that releases him from subjection to a death-dealing society and transforms him, as it were, into a free child of Mother Earth. In the "midst of this general doom" all thoughts of suicide are driven from his mind, and he is propelled, "panic-stricken," by what looks very much like an unconscious survival instinct, the promptings of his 'inner nature', to the relative safety of the open land beyond the city gates (53). Finding himself alive and unscathed in the "fertile surroundings of Santiago," he "thanked God" for what is now termed his "miraculous escape," weeping "with rapture to find that the blessing of life, in all its wealth and variety, was still his to enjoy" (54). This newly discovered delight in corporeal existence is nonetheless quickly dampened when he recalls Josefa, and, having received a false eye-witness report by a woman who claims she saw her hang before the quake struck, Jerónimo "wished that the destructive fury of nature might unleash itself on him once more" (54).

Two things are important to note here. Firstly, much of the narrative discourse is focalised through the protagonists, but because this is rarely made explicit it is unclear as to whether particular statements or descriptions reflect their perspective or that of the narrator, which, as already observed, is at times strongly biased and at others markedly dispassionate.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, the impact

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<sup>5</sup> An excellent analysis of the duplicitous nature of Kleist's narrator is provided in Stephens 1994. On "The Earthquake" see especially 194-206.

of the earthquake is attributed, at least by Jerónimo, to God when it is felt to have favoured him, but to “nature” when it is assumed to have failed to save Josefa. Accordingly, when Jerónimo, having dried his tears and set out to explore his new surrounds, stumbles upon Josefa bathing Felipe beside a stream, God, rather than nature, is once again invoked as the perceived agent of the earthquake: “With what ecstasy they embraced, the unhappy pair, saved by a divine miracle!” (55)

The following account of Josefa’s escape with Felipe seems to lend weight to the idea that this was something other than simply fortuitous. Having dashed back to the convent to rescue her son, she is at first said to have emerged from the burning building with Felipe “as if protected by all the angels in heaven” (55); but when they then also narrowly escape being hit by the falling gable that ignominiously kills the Abbess, “together with nearly all her nuns,” the subjunctive “as if” modulates into the confident assertion that it was indeed “heaven” that had restored to Josefa her “beloved son” (56). By contrast, all those representatives of the social order that had condemned the lovers seem to have been singled out for special punishment. As she flees the city, Josefa encounters “the mangled body of the Archbishop, which had just been dragged from the wreckage of the cathedral.” In addition:

The Viceroy’s palace had collapsed, the law court in which sentence had been passed on her was in flames, and in the place where her father’s house had stood there was now a seething lake from which reddish vapours were rising. (56)

Assuming that the earthquake was divinely ordained, then, it appears that God’s vengeance was directed against the social order that claimed to be acting in His name in its repressive regimentation of Eros. However, when it is hinted that this whole description of the ruination of Santiago’s *ancien regime*, narrated in the third person, follows Josefa’s first-person account (“All this, in a voice filled with emotion, she now told Jerónimo,” 57), the reader is subtly alerted to the possibility that this description of the impact of the earthquake might be no less skewed than that of the anonymous eye witness who reported Josefa definitively dead. Assuming that this is Josefa’s view, the account betrays an unacknowledged desire to see her enemies laid low that is uncomfortably reminiscent of the vengefulness and *Blutlust* previously attributed to Santiago’s pious womenfolk!

This ever so subtle distancing of the implied authorial stance from that of the protagonists is taken to the brink of outright parody when the narrator subsequently observes that “it moved them greatly to think how much misery had to afflict the world in order to bring about their happiness” (57). The intertextual referent here is twofold. Most obviously, this passage echoes the ever more absurd efforts of Voltaire’s fictional philosopher Pangloss to demonstrate to his ill-fated

pupil *Candide* that everything was “for the best” in this “best of all possible worlds.” At the same time, the lovers’ outrageously self-aggrandizing interpretation of the catastrophe as orchestrated to serve their interests alone necessarily also invokes the discourse of metaphysical optimism that is the target of Voltaire’s popular satire of 1759. For the sceptical French *philosophe*, the Lisbon Earthquake disclosed incontrovertibly the untenability of the optimistic faith that he too had himself formerly shared, as formulated especially by Alexander Pope in his influential *Essay on Man* (1733).<sup>6</sup> Underlying this version of optimism was the physico-theological reconceptualisation of Providence as manifest in the physical world of Nature. In Pope’s words:

Who finds not Providence all good and wise,  
Alike in what it gives, and what denies?  
[. . .]  
All Nature is but Art, unknown to thee;  
All Chance, Direction which thou canst not see;  
All Discord, Harmony, not understood;  
All partial Evil, universal Good:  
And, in spite of Pride, in erring Reason’s spite,  
One truth is clear, “WHATEVER IS, IS RIGHT.”  
(Pope 1965: 12, 15)

This position is definitively rejected in Voltaire’s “Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne,” subtitled “Examen de cet axiome: ‘Tout est bien’” (An examination of the axiom: ‘All is well’) of 1756. In his later work, *Candide*, it is in the wake of the quake, while being flogged at the hands of the Church on the grounds of having “listened with an air of approval” to Pangloss’s disquisition on the necessity of “the fall of Man” to this “best of all possible worlds,” that the long-suffering protagonist finally rebels. While his tutor is being executed, and he himself is “weltering in blood and trembling with fear and confusion,” *Candide* wonders ruefully, “If this is the best of all possible worlds [. . .] what can the rest be like?” (Voltaire 1947: 34-37)

Voltaire’s disillusionment with metaphysical optimism is accompanied by a marked disaffection with the earth, which he construes in the ode as a locus of evil and destruction: “Il le faut avouer, le mal est sur la terre” (We must acknowledge that evil is in the world/on the earth) (Voltaire in Breidert 1994: 67). In dismissing physico-theology, Voltaire drives a rationalist wedge between God and Nature, and between Nature and Man: since “la nature est muette” (Nature is

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<sup>6</sup> Voltaire even wrote his own work in the manner and spirit of Pope’s, called *Discours sur l’homme*. Boer and Sanders 2005: 102.

mute) (69), meaning and morality must be confined to the exclusively human realm. While, in its revised form, the ode ends with the hopeful affirmation, “Un jour tout sera bien” (One day all will be well) (72), the implication seems to be that this will only come about if and when, nature is thoroughly humanised. In the concluding words of *Candide*, “Il faut cultiver notre jardin” (We must cultivate our garden). Stripped of any lingering traces of the divine, denied both communicative capability and ethical considerability, other-than-human “nature” would henceforth be handed over to scientific knowledge, technological control and economic exploitation, while the emergent “humanities” were to confine themselves to the exclusively human domain of “culture”: the Modern Constitution, as Serres terms it, was framed amidst the rubble of Lisbon. Today, the resultant divide between the humanities and the sciences represents a major impediment to the resolution of many ecological problems, including climate change. For while the sciences are indispensable to understanding the biophysical world, conceptualizing our role within this world requires the humanities: “and to reach sustainability requires their integration” (Fischer *et al.* 2007: 623).

Despite the hint of parody pertaining to Jérónimo’s and Josepha’s self-serving take on the quake, Kleist’s narrative does not unequivocally endorse Voltaire’s moral humanism. On the contrary, at this point in the plot, the text appears to draw closer to Rousseau’s counter-position, as outlined most explicitly in the lengthy letter that he wrote to Voltaire in response to his ode (Aug. 18, 1756). Challenging the Modern Constitution at the very beginning of its historical emergence, Rousseau discloses the role of socio-cultural factors in exacerbating the Lisbon catastrophe. At the same time, he endeavours to defend the inherent rationality and ultimate goodness of the laws of nature, not all of which, he stressed, were understood. In his analysis, the optimist’s assertion “all is well” or “good” (“bien”) should be taken to mean, not that everything (“tout”) is wholly good, but that the whole (“le tout”) is good. Thus, for example, while my own death might well be experienced by me and those who love me as an evil, this is a necessary evil that ultimately serves the good: for in becoming food for other creatures, my body in death fertilises the earth and thereby contributes to the continuation of life. Death, from this perspective, is in truth a gift.

The counterpart of Rousseau’s materialist reconceptualisation of the afterlife is a socio-political corrective to the emergent concept of ‘natural disaster’. In Rousseau’s analysis, the earthquake only had such a catastrophic impact because it occurred so close to a city where around 20,000 houses of six to seven storeys were packed tightly together, and from whence, moreover, many occupants were initially reluctant to flee, evidently valuing their material possessions more highly than their lives. This was, moreover, a wealthy European city: earthquakes

also occur in deserts, Rousseau observes, but these are not viewed as newsworthy because they do not affect an urban elite. In addition, he observes, the inhabitants of such climes were generally less vulnerable to earthquake in that they were less encumbered by possessions in their flight and their habitations tended to cause less damage when they fell (Rousseau in Breidert 1994: 81-93). From this perspective—one that was also put forward by Kant in the series of essays that he published in the Königsberg press following the Lisbon earthquake—there is no such thing as a wholly ‘natural’ disaster. Violent events undoubtedly occur in nature, and we should by all means endeavour to understand their material causes. The destructivity of their impact could nonetheless be minimised by better conforming our collective existence to natural contingencies, such as the possibility of earthquake, that might serve purposes that we cannot comprehend and that were in any case beyond our control.<sup>7</sup> The evil that was to be overcome, then, lay not in nature, but in society. By contrast with those, both in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and since, who would have us rely on a technical fix, Rousseau advances an ethos of social adaptation, conjoined with the enhancement of environmental justice, which resonates with some of today’s more progressive policy recommendations for living with climate change (e.g. Brunner *et al.* 2004).

In keeping with the physico-theological orientation of the Rousseauian view, in the middle section of Kleist’s narrative the destruction of Santiago is shown to interrupt the workings of what is portrayed as a patently corrupt and oppressive social system. Moreover, the earthquake appears to have facilitated the recovery of a beneficent naturalness, both inner and outer, individual and collective, with the valley in which the lovers are reunited being cast as a veritable paradise regained. Whereas at first, we are told that Josefa’s joy was such that, for her, this “might have been the Garden of Eden,” the proceeding description effectively assimilates the physical environment to this mythical paradigm, once again turning an ‘as if’ statement into an actuality: “In the meantime the loveliest of nights had fallen, wonderfully mild and fragrant, silvery and still, a night such as only a poet might dream of” (57). While other survivors are said to be “preparing their beds of moss and foliage” and lamenting their loss, Jéronimo and Josefa slip away to revel in their joy in a “denser part of the wood,” beneath a “pomegranate tree, its outspread branches heavy with scented fruit, and high on its crest the nightingale piped its voluptuous song” (57). The emphatically, even cloyingly, sensuous

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<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in dismissing suggestions that earthquakes could be prevented by boring holes deep into the earth’s crust to release the subterranean gases that were then widely held responsible for both earthquakes and volcanoes, Kant argues that, “Man must learn to conform himself to nature, but instead, he desires it to conform to him.” Kant in Breidert 1994: 131.

language of this description serves to link the collapse, or at least suspension, of the old social order with the liberation of *Eros*, as implicit in the symbolic association of the pomegranate with Aphrodite. Moreover, the following passage implies that on a collective level the 'return to nature' is conducive also to a recovery of compassion, or *Agape*, as the authors of the New Testament refer to the self-giving love proclaimed by Jesus of Nazareth.

It is in the first place Josefa who is shown to literally give of herself on being asked to feed another couples' child at her own breast by a young man whom she initially assumes to be a stranger. Discovering that he is in fact a family acquaintance, the lovers finding themselves readmitted to society, or at any rate, accepted without question into the midst of Don Fernando's noble party. Now lovers feel themselves to be doubly blessed: Josefa "had a feeling, which she could not suppress, that the preceding day, despite all the misery it had brought upon the world, had been a mercy such as heaven had never yet bestowed on her" (59-60).

Despite the hint of parody that might once more be discerned in this self-interested reading of events, it is followed by a description that implies that the earthquake had not only been liberating for the lovers, but salutary for the society as a whole:

And indeed, in the midst of horrifying time in which all the earthly possessions of men were perishing and all nature was in danger of being engulfed, the human spirit itself seemed to unfold like the fairest of flowers. In the fields, as far as the eye could see, men and women of every social station could be seen lying side by side, princes and beggars, ladies and peasant women, government officials and day labourers, friars and nuns: pitying one another, helping one another, gladly sharing anything they had saved to keep themselves alive, as if the general disaster had united all its survivors into a single family. (60)

The watery connotations of the verbal construction, "being engulfed," recall not only the historical flood that accompanied the Lisbon earthquake, but also the biblical deluge: that mythic archetype of redemptive violence which returns in secularised guise in the utopian imaginary of the French Revolution. For Kleist's generation, however, this political earthquake had not culminated in the triumph of the kind of 'liberté, égalité, fraternité' imaged here as the fruit of a literal earthquake, but in the bloodbath of the Terror and the dictatorship of the imperialistic Napoleon Bonaparte (towards whom the Prussian patriot Kleist harboured a particular hatred). Nor is this the end of Kleist's narrative. As it turns out, the plot structure of the stories that are being told around the scattered fireplaces of the survivors in the valley at this point—tales of "extraordinary heroic deeds [. . .] of fearlessness, of magnanimous contempt for danger, of self-denial

and super-human self-sacrifice, of life unhesitatingly cast away as if it were the most trifling of possessions and could be recovered a moment later” (60)—is replicated at the end of “The Earthquake in Chile”. However, the “sum of general well-being” that Josefa is, once again, weighing up at this point, is ultimately recalibrated at the lovers’ expense.

Ironically, the tragic denouement of this twisted tale is precipitated precisely by the lovers’ overly optimistic interpretation of the catastrophe, both in terms of the “spirit of reconciliation” (59) that they perceived it to have engendered, and the divine intention that they discerned in it. On being reunited, they had initially planned to take advantage of the general chaos in order to escape to Spain. Now though, “the old order of things having undergone such an upheaval,” in Jéronimo’s assessment, they determine to petition the Viceroy for a pardon—albeit, at Josefa’s prudent suggestion, from the port of La Concepcion, thereby enabling them to make a hasty getaway should the appeal fail. First, though, Josefa—against the wise advice of Don Fernando’s sister-in-law Dona Isabel—insists on joining the throng of survivors returning to the one church left standing in the city in order to “cast herself down before her Maker [. . .] at this time, when His incomprehensible and sublime power was being made so evident.” (61) In departing from the “valley of the blessed,” the lovers fall victim to the murderous reconstitution of the old social order, facilitated by a reactionary interpretation of catastrophe.<sup>8</sup>

Not insignificantly, the church in which this occurs is identified as Dominican, the Dominican order having historically been most avid in the persecution of witches in the German region. Subtle allusions to the fiery death to which Josefa too had originally been condemned are encoded in the opening descriptions of the church, where “all the candelabra were blazing with light”; the stained glass window “burned like the very evening sun”; and a “flame of zeal” rose “to heaven” (63). In this ominous setting, a sermon is preached likening Santiago to the biblical Sodom and Gomorrah, while the earthquake is construed as an act of divine vengeance against the city not only for its “moral depravity” (63) in general, but in particular for the “impious” “indulgence” shown to the sinners who had perpetrated such an “outrage” in the convent garden. This rabble-rousing sermon is delivered by an old canon, or *Chorherr* in German, a title that is literalised here as the preacher leads the choir of voices that call once more for

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<sup>8</sup> As Helmut Schneider has observed, the triadic structure of the novella both invokes and reverses Rousseau’s triadic philosophy of history: whereas the latter traces a trajectory from nature through civilisation to nature regained, Kleist’s narrative moves from civilisation through nature to the reassertion of civilisation (Schneider, 1985: 118).



the death of the lovers: "And the whole assembly of Christians in that temple of Jesus raised a cry of 'Stone them! Stone them!'" (65)

Implicitly recalling the biblical narrative in which Jesus intervenes precisely to prevent the stoning of an adulteress (John 8:3-11), the ironic tone of the narrative voice implies a critical view of the crowd, which becomes ever more emphatic in the course of this climactic scene. Addressed by J eronimo as "monsters" (65), by Josefa as "bloodthirsty tigers" (66) and referred to by Don Fernando as "murderous villains" (65), the narrator describes the crowd successively as a "furious mob" (65), "frenzied mob" (66), and "butchers" (66). Among them is J eronimo's father, who, mimicking the punitive patriarchal violence attributed by the canon to God, surprisingly produces a cudgel with which he slays his own son, along with Don Fernando's other sister-in-law, Donna Constanza, who had been standing beside him and was therefore mistaken for Josefa. The latter now declares her identity, as J eronimo had done previously, in the hope of ending the fighting, and is murdered by the cobbler, Master Pedrillo, who had formerly worked for her. His "lust for slaughter not yet unsated" (66), this "prince of the satanic rabble" (67), as the congregation are now dubbed by the narrator, proceeds to dash out the brains of Don Fernando's baby boy, Juan, whom Josefa had been nursing and who was therefore mistaken for "her bastard" (66), against one of the pillars of the church. Again, the irony is pointed: the architectural feature that was meant to support a building dedicated to the *agapic* teaching of Christ, whose crucifixion was meant to be the sacrifice to end all sacrifice, becomes the means of enacting a reversion to the primitive logic of the scapegoat in what Rene Girard (1985) interprets as a classic instantiation of the mimetic violence. In response to this, the bereaved father speechlessly "raised his eyes to heaven in inexpressible anguish" (67).

This gesture of bewilderment and dismay, which both echoes and contrasts with the description of an unknown man whom J eronimo had previously witnessed during his flight from the city, "speechlessly extending his trembling hands to heaven" (53), points to the inability of words to encompass so horrific an experience. On the one hand, this very failure of language might be seen to compound the trauma that, in the specific socio-cultural context in which it occurred, the earthquake had brought in its wake.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Don Fernando's abandonment of speech could also be seen as signalling a suspension of the hermeneutic violence implicit in the attribution of divine intentionality to the earthquake (an attribution that is evidently still in play in the other man's imploring hand gesture). A suspension of this kind was urged, for example, by

<sup>9</sup> I am indebted to Teresa Toulouse for the reminder of the failure of language in the face of trauma.

Kant, who insisted in one of his essays on the Lisbon earthquake that instead of hubristically speculating about who might have incurred God's wrath and why, our duty as Christians was to show compassion towards the victims of such disasters, and, where possible, lend them our assistance (Kant in Breidert 1994: 133). In a contemporary context, in which fundamentalist believers are still wont to blame the victims of what they take to be acts of divine vengeance meted out in the medium of environmental catastrophe, Kant's call for compassion demands to be reindorsed.

It is with precisely such an act of compassion that Kleist's narrative concludes. After a period of estrangement, Don Fernando's wife, Donna Elvira, is reconciled with her husband, whose reckless heroism had caused the death of their child, and together they adopt "the little stranger as their own son." The final words of the novella affirm that "when Don Fernando compared Felipe with Juan and the ways in which he had acquired the two of them, it almost seemed to him that he had reason to be glad" (67). This seemingly redemptive ending nonetheless harbours a number of ironies and uncertainties. For one thing, having championed the cause of Eros throughout, the narrative suddenly seems to be emphatically privileging Agape. Or is it? Don Fernando was described as "filled with superhuman heroism" when, with two babies tucked under one arm, he selflessly—and singularly unsuccessfully—sought to fight off the lynch mob single handed with the other. However, his earlier eagerness for Josefa to breastfeed his son and subsequent insistence on taking her arm on the way to church, against the protestations of Donna Isabel and his wife, could be read as betraying a certain erotic interest in this scandalously fallen woman. However that might be, and the narrator keeps us guessing, his attempt to put a positive spin on events is so qualified ("almost", "seemed", "as if he ought") as to indicate that his feelings remain profoundly mixed.

Kleist's "Earthquake in Chile" thus offers two diametrically opposed models of human comportment in the face of catastrophe. In the midst and immediate aftermath of the destruction of Santiago, the townspeople appear ready to set aside their differences to assist one another. Eros and agape are reconciled as the reunited lovers are drawn into the wider circle of compassionate community. Although there are hints that bravery, kindness and heroism are not the whole story—Jéronimo, for example, did not stop to help anybody on his flight from the city, and there are reports of looting, murder and impromptu executions—the middle section of the narrative tends to support the optimistic view that crisis situations can bring out the best in people. However, as the bloody culmination indicates, the breakdown of social order attending an interruptive event such as this provides a space not only for compassionate actions but also for hysterical

reactions, in which kindness is displaced by fear and anger and the rhetoric of divine justice deployed to legitimate a lynching. Human behaviour in the face of catastrophe is disclosed as variable and volatile, as well as crucially informed by the cultural frameworks within which the event is interpreted, while the will of God is shown to be utterly indecipherable, and the goodness or otherwise of Nature ultimately undecidable.

When Kleist first offered this story for publication, along with a number of others, he subtitled his collection “moralische Erzählungen” (“moral tales”). With this designation, which was subsequently dropped, he aligned his work with the French tradition of “contes moreaux” and perhaps specifically the subgenre of “contes philosophique,” of which *Candide* is the most famous exemplar (Appelt and Grathoff 1986: 76-9). However, whereas Voltaire uses narrative to mount a philosophical argument by literary means, Kleist’s writing is insistently interrogative, using narrative to explore the very process of meaning making. This is a story about story-telling: about the use of narrative to make sense of an occurrence in ways that have critical implications for action. As such, it is an exemplary work of Romantic fiction, conforming to Friedrich Schlegel’s definition of “romantische Poesie” as containing within itself its own theory of interpretation (Schlegel 1988).<sup>10</sup> In the Romantic era, that which is proper to literature emerges out of the demolition of dogmatism. “The Earthquake in Chile” constitutes a primal scene of the collapse of certainty out of which modern literature as self-reflexive art is born: and it was the Earthquake in Lisbon, no less than Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* that arguably engendered this epistemological rupture.

In conclusion, I believe that it is precisely in this moment of negativity—specifically, the refusal of hermeneutic closure—that Kleist’s narrative exemplifies the potential value of literature in the catastrophic horizon of the present. In its self-reflexive narrative investigation of the linkages between the stories that are told about a disaster and the ways in which people respond to it, “The Earthquake in Chile” offers training in the kind of hermeneutic self-consciousness—incorporating an appreciation of the murkiness of human motivation, the volatility of our emotions, and the deceptiveness of perceived reality—that might assist us to comport ourselves ethically in the midst of those catastrophes that are increasingly of our own making.

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<sup>10</sup> On early German Romantic aesthetics and literary theory, see also Rigby 2004: 101-11.

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## 論述災難：環境浩劫詮釋學

### 摘要

不論是災難本身或作為其潛在的可能，個人、社群及社會對環境浩劫的反應，都將透過認知該災難的文化詮釋架構。從這個角度來說，面對生態危機的考驗不僅攸關科學及社會、實際及政治等面向，也牽涉到詮釋學及論述學。面對這樣的挑戰，不論起源是神話、宗教、哲學或是政治的，文學及文化研究對於檢視上述的詮釋架構具有長足的貢獻。這些框架在面對即將來臨的災難之時，或許讓我們在行動上的準備同時符合效率與倫理、卻也可能成為其絆腳石。本文以解讀克萊斯特(Heinrich von Kleist)的短篇小說《智利大地震》(1807)來說明此一論點。小說雖以1647年肆虐智利聖地牙哥的大地震作為背景，卻同時回應了1755年里斯本大地震之後，神性與自然、社會的關係上的哲學與宗教爭辯。克萊斯特並未明確擁護這些爭辯中的某特定立場，而是採取一種敘事式的研究，呈現來自環境災難中、各類實際及政治論述框架的意涵。儘管地震所帶來的浩劫有別於像氣候變遷之類的人為災難，克萊斯特的敘事揭示了，在環境災難的脈絡中，「自然」與「文化」、文字與世界之間不可避免的糾結關係。

**關鍵字：**生態文學批評，浩劫，氣候變遷，里斯本大地震，克萊斯特，康德，盧梭，伏爾泰