M1 S8 Climate Changed Being Alive: Foresting Literary and Poetic Responses to Forests, Woods, Trees, Plants

UP LCIBY020 (Prof. Cécile Roudeau)
Climate-Changed Literature? On Reading, Misreading, and Unreading Texts We Once Knew.
Reading like a Tree
Climate model projections have long suggested that global temperatures will continue to rise and precipitation to decrease, but new research has predicted that these weather and climate disasters, to which I refer collectively as “stormy weather,” will become more common and more severe (see Allen 2003; Cornwall 2016; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2016; Otto 2016). What interests me about stormy weather is the immediacy of its destruction and disruptions, which dramatically materialize the abstractions of scientific research findings. To invoke oaken imagery once again, increased tree morbidity and mortality cause a number of adverse effects—including the release of carbon dioxide otherwise sequestered in the trees and the reduction of animal populations reliant on their shelter—but colorless gas and missing birds are forms of “slow” environmental violence, far more difficult to perceive than storms (see Nixon 2013). As teachers, we know that stormy weather not only makes long-term environmental shifts perceptible but also makes them impossible to ignore. Stormy weather affects our pedagogy, and as it escalates, emergencies will disrupt more course sessions and displace more students, fomenting anxieties both directly and indirectly related to classroom performance. When emergency conditions threaten students’ physical safety, emotional well-being, and access to vital resources, as well as their ability to focus, attend, participate, and complete readings, exams, and assignments, how do we cope with the pedagogical consequences of stormy weather?

If the urgency of a subject were indeed a criterion of its seriousness, then, considering what climate change actually portends for the future of the earth, it should surely follow that this would be the principal preoccupation of writers the world over—and this, I think, is very far from being the case.

But why? Are the currents of global warming too wild to be navigated in the accustomed barques of narration? But the truth, as is now widely acknowledged, is that we have entered a time when the wild has become the norm: if certain literary forms are unable to negotiate these torrents, then they will have failed—and their failures will have to be counted as an aspect of the broader imaginative and cultural failure that lies at the heart of the climate crisis.

To recognize the Anthropocene as ‘emergent’ alters the understanding of what may be environmentally destructive or not. For the encroachment of human activity on more and more of the biosphere is often a result of activities that once straightforwardly enhanced human welfare but which have now crossed a certain threshold in magnitude and impact. In effect, the Anthropocene here names a necessarily vague but insidious border at which what used to be clear human goods begin to flip over into sources of degradation and environmental harm. For instance, the progressive-liberal successes of increased social inclusion, prosperity and consumption arguably also impoverish the lives of innumerable future generations; increased longevity in human populations, aided by improved health services, may also contribute to the planet’s next mass extinction event. How then to write literary criticism in a time of acknowledged mass extinction without just seeming absurd? How far is such writing vulnerable to the claim that we are still denying or negotiating with the Anthropocene by trying to squeeze it into conventional categories? The insidious effect of the Anthropocene, as an emergent phenomenon with drastically revisionist after-effects, is that what most people take for normality must drift towards being a form of environmental denial. (The purpose of this chapter is) “to engage with the question of how this transformation also applies to the regional field of literary and cultural criticism.”

Writing, Reading, Teaching in the Anthropocene: Questions of Forms/Formulating Questions

- Keywords
- Tensions/questions
- Problems
- Examples
Excerpts from Amitav Ghosh (b. 1956), “Stories,” from *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (University of Chicago Press 2016), 3-84, stories 6, 7, 8, 13, 14
The Great Derangement?

A practice of concealment?

…the questions that confront writers and artists today are not just those of the politics of the carbon economy; many of them have to do also with our own practices and the ways in which they make us *complicit in the concealments* of the broader culture…. When readers and museumgoers turn to the art and literature of our time, will they not look, first, and most urgently, for traces and portents of the altered world of their inheritance? And when they fail to find them, what should they—what can they do—other than to conclude that ours was a time when most forms of art and literature were drawn into the modes of concealment that prevented people from recognizing the realities of their plight? Quite possibly then, this era, which so congratulates itself on its self-awareness, will come to be known as the time of the Great Derangement.

(end of “Story 4”)
About an exceptional tornado that occurred in India in 1978 and that Ghosh witnessed, “Story 6”

1)

On the face of it there is no reason why such an event should be difficult to translate into fiction; after all, many novels are filled with strange happenings. Why then did I fail, despite my best efforts, to send a character down a road that is imminently to be struck by a tornado?

In reflecting on this I find myself asking, What would I make of such a scene were I to come across it in a novel written by someone else. I suspect that my response would be one of incredulity; I would be inclined to think that the scene was a contrivance of last resort. Surely, only a writer whose imaginative resources were utterly depleted would fall back on a situation of such extreme improbability.
2) What does probability – a mathematical idea—have to do with fiction?

The answer is: Everything. For, as Ian Hacking, a prominent historian of the concept, puts it, probability is a “manner of conceiving the world constituted without our being aware of it.”

Probability and the modern novel are in fact twins, born at about the same time, among the same people, under a shared star that destined them to work as vessels for the containment of the same kind of experience. Before the birth of the modern novel, wherever stories were told, fiction delighted in the unheard-of and the unlikely. Narratives like those of The Arabian Nights, The Journey to the West and The Decameron, proceed by leaping blithely from one exceptional event to another. This, after all, is how storytelling must necessarily proceed, inasmuch as it is a recounting of “what happened”—for such an inquiry can arise only in relation to something out of the ordinary, which is but another way of saying “exceptional” or “unlikely”. In essence, narrative proceeds by linking together moments and scenes that are in some way distinctive or different: these are, of course, nothing other than instances of exception.
Novels too proceed in this fashion, but what is distinctive about the form is precisely the concealment of those exceptional moments that serve as the motor of narrative. This is achieved through the insertion of what Franco Moretti, the literary theorist, calls “fillers.” According to Moretti, “fillers function very much like the good manners so important in Austen: they are both mechanisms designed to keep the ‘narrativity’ of life under control—to give a regularity, a ‘style’ to existence.” It is through this mechanism that worlds are conjured up, through everyday details, which function “as the opposite of narrative.”

It is thus that the novel takes its modern form, through “the relocation of the unheard-of toward the background... while the everyday moves into the foreground.”

Thus was the novel midwifed into existence around the world, through the banishing of the improbable and the insertion of the everyday.
Why should the rhetoric of the everyday appear at exactly the same time when a regime of statistics, ruled by ideas of probability and improbability, was beginning to give new shapes to society. Why did fillers suddenly become so important? Moretti’s answer is “Because they offer the kind of narrative pleasure compatible with the new regularity of bourgeois life. Fillers turn the novel into a “calm passion”… they are part of what Weber called the “rationalization “ of modern life: a process that begins in the economy and the administration, but eventually pervades the sphere of free time, private life, entertainment, feelings…. Or in other words fillers are an attempt at rationalizing the novelistic universe turning it into a world of few surprises, fewer adventures, and no miracles at all.”
Powers, at Shax & Co.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1JFoiOn0XkI
The regime of gradualism, continuity, probability (story 6)

This regime of thought imposed itself not only on the arts but also on the sciences. That is why *Time’s Arrow, Time’s Cycle*, Stephen J. Gould’s brilliant study of the geological theories of gradualism and catastrophism is, in essence, a study of narrative. In Gould’s telling of the story, the catastrophist recounting of the earth’s history is exemplified by Thomas Burnet’s *Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1690), in which the narrative turns on events of “unrepeatable uniqueness.” As opposed to this, the gradualist approach, championed by James Hutton (1726-97) and Charles Lyell (1797-1875), privileges slow processes that unfold over time at even predictable rates. The central credo in this doctrine was “nothing could change otherwise than the way things were seen to change in the present.” Or, to put it simply: “Nature does not make leaps.”

The trouble, however, is that Nature does certainly jump, if not leap. The geological record bears witness to many fractures in time, some of which led to mass extinctions and the like: it was one such, in the form of the Chicxulub asteroid, that probably killed the dinosaurs. It is indisputable, in any event, that catastrophes waylay both the earth and its individual inhabitants at unpredictable intervals and in the most improbable ways.

Which, then, has the primacy in the real world – predictable processes or unlikely events? Gould’s response is “the only answer can be ‘both and neither’.
It was not until quite recently that geology reached this agnostic consensus. Through much of the era when geology—and also the modern novel—were coming of age, the gradualist (or ‘uniformitarian”) view held absolute sway, and catastrophism was exiled to the margins.

Unlikely though it may seem today, the 19th century was indeed a time when it was assumed in both fiction and geology that Nature was moderate and orderly: this was a distinctive mark of a new and “modern” worldview.

*However, gradualism had to make place for exceptionalism*, as Ghosh relates:

Gradualism became “a set of blinders” that eventually had to be put aside in favour of a view that recognizes the twin requirements of uniqueness to mark moments of time as distinctive and lawfulness to establish a basis of intelligibility.”

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If novels were not built upon a scaffolding of exceptional moments, writers would be faced with the Borgesian task of reproducing the world in its entirety. But the modern novel, unlike geology, has never been forced to confront the centrality of the improbable: the concealment of its scaffolding events [i.e. exceptional moments] continues to be essential to its functioning. It is this that makes a certain kind of narrative a recognizably modern novel.
Here then is the irony of the “realist” novel: the very gestures with which it conjures up reality are actually a concealment of the real.

Within the pages of a novel an event that is only slightly improbable in real life—say, an unexpected encounter with a long-lost childhood friend—may seem wildly unlikely: the writer will have to work hard to make it appear persuasive.

If that is true of a small fluke of chance, consider how much harder a writer would have to work to set up a scene that is wildly improbable even in real life? For example, a scene in which a character is walking down a road at the precise moment when it is hit by an unheard-of weather phenomenon?

To introduce such happenings into a novel is in fact to court eviction from the mansion in which serious fiction has long been in residence; it is to risk banishment to the humbler dwellings that surround the manor house—those generic outhouses that were once known by names such as “the Gothic,” the “romance” or “the melodrama,” and have now come to be called “fantasy,” “horror”, and “science fiction.”
Truer than fiction? (from Story 7).

Three excerpts, first:

... it appears that we are now in an era that will be defined precisely by events that appear, by our current standards of normality, highly improbable: flash floods, hundred-year storms, persistent droughts, spells of unprecedented heat, sudden landslides....

The superstorm that struck New York in 2012, Hurricane Sandy, was one such highly improbable phenomenon: the word unprecedented has perhaps never figured so often in the description of a weather event. ...Never before had a hurricane veered sharply westward in the mid-Atlantic. In turning, it also merged with a winter storm...

Indeed Sandy was an event of such a high degree of improbability that it confounded statistical weather-prediction models. Yet dynamic modes, based on the laws of physics, were able to accurately predict its trajectory as well as its impacts.

But calculations of risk, on which officials base their decisions in emergencies, are based largely on probabilities. In the case of Sandy...the essential improbability of the phenomenon led them to underestimate the threat and thus delay emergency measures.

(Adam) Sobel goes on to make the argument, as have many others, that human beings are intrinsically unable to prepare for rare events. But has this really been the case throughout human history? Or is it rather an aspect of the unconscious patterns of thought –or “common sense”—that gained ascendency with a growing faith in “the regularity of bourgeois life”?

I suspect that human beings were generally catastrophists at heart until their instinctive awareness of the earth’s unpredictability was gradually supplanted by a belief in uniformitarianism—a regime of ideas that was supported by scientific theories like Lyell’s, and also by a range of governmental practices that were informed by statistics and probability.

BUT in the era of global warming...there is no place where the orderly expectations of bourgeois life hold unchallenged sway. It is as though our earth had become a literary critic and were laughing at Flaubert, Bankim, and their like, mocking their mockery of the “prodigious happenings” that occur so often in romances and epic poems.

This, then, is the first of the many ways in which the age of global warming defies both literary fiction and contemporary common sense: the weather events of this time have a very high degree of improbability. They are not easily accommodated in the deliberately prosaic world of serious prose fiction.
3) POETRY, on the other hand, has long had an intimate relationship with climactic events:
as Geoffrey Parker points out, John Milton began to compose *Paradise Lost* during a winter of extreme cold, and “unpredictable and unforgiving changes in the climate are central to his story. Milton’s fictional world, like the real one in which he lived, was... a “universe of death” at the mercy of extremes of heat and cold.’ This is a universe very different from that of the contemporary literary novel. ... Yet fortunately, from time to time, there have also been movements that celebrated the unheard-of and the improbable: surrealism, for instance, and, most significantly, magical realism, which is replete with events that have no relation to the calculus of probability.

There is, however, an important difference between the weather events that we are now experiencing and those that occur in surrealist and magical realist novels: improbable though they might be, these events are neither surreal nor magical. To the contrary, these highly improbable occurrences are overwhelmingly, urgently, astoundingly real.
Uncanny co-presences (Story 8). Four excerpts. First:

The Sundarbans are nothing like the forests that usually figure in literature. The greenery is dense, tangled and low; the canopy is not above but around you, constantly clawing at your skin and your clothes. No breeze can enter the thickets of this forest; when the air stirs at all it is because of the buzzing of flies and other insects. Underfoot, instead of a carpet of softly decaying foliage, there is a bank of slippery, knee-deep mud, perforated by the sharp points that protrude from mangrove roots. Nor do any vistas present themselves except when you are on one of the hundreds of creeks and channels that wind through the landscape—and even then it is the water alone that opens itself; the forest withdraws behind its muddy ramparts, disclosing nothing.
In the Sundarbans, tigers are everywhere and nowhere. Often when you go ashore, you will find fresh tiger prints in the mud, but of the animal itself you will see nothing: glimpses of tigers are exceedingly uncommon and rarely more than fleeting. Yet you cannot doubt, since the prints are so fresh, that a tiger is somewhere nearby; and you know that it is probably watching you. …

Suffice it to say that in some villages every household has lost a member to a tiger; everyone has a story to tell.

In these stories a great deal hinges on the eyes; seeing is one of their central themes; not seeing is another. The tiger is watching you; you are aware of its gaze, as you always are, but you do not see it; you do not lock eyes with it until it launches its charge, and at that moment a shock courses through you and you are immobilized, frozen.

The folk epic of the Sundarbans, *Bon Bibir Johuranama* (*The Miracles of Bon Bibi*) comes to a climax in one such moment of mutual beholding, when the tiger demon, Dokkhin Rai, locks eyes with the protagonist, a boy called Dukhey: To
“It was then from afar, that the demon saw Dukhey . . .

Long had he hungered for this much-awaited prize; in an instant he assumed his tiger disguise.

‘How long has it been since human flesh came my way? Now bliss awaits me in the shape of this boy Dukhey.’

On the far mudbank Dukhey caught sight of the beast: ‘that tiger is the demon and I’m to be his feast.’

Raising its head, the tiger reared its immense back; its jowls filled like sails as it sprang to attack.

The boy’s life took wing, on seeing this fearsome sight.’
Fourth:

Many stories of encounters with tigers hinge upon a moment of mutual recognition like this one. To look into the tiger’s eyes is to recognize a presence of which you are already aware; and in that moment of contact you realize that this presence possesses a similar awareness of you, even though it is not human. This mute exchange of gazes is the only communication that is possible between you and this presence—yet communication it undoubtedly is.

…

But what is it that you are communicating with, at this moment of extreme danger, when your mind is in a state unlike any you’ve ever known before?
The Uncanny in 2 slides. *First:*

It is surely no coincidence that the word *uncanny* has begun to be used, with ever greater frequency, in relation to climate change. Writing of the freakish events and objects of our era, Timothy Morton asks, “Isn’t it the case, that the effect delivered to us in the (unaccustomed) rain, the weird cyclone, the oil slick is something uncanny?” George Marshall writes, “Climate change is inherently uncanny: Weather conditions, and the high-carbon lifestyles that are changing them, are extremely familiar and yet have now been given a new menace and uncertainty.”

No other word comes close to expressing the strangeness of what is unfolding around us. For these changes are not merely strange in the sense of being unknown or alien; their uncanniness lies precisely in the fact that in these encounters we recognize something we had turned away from: that is to say, the presence and proximity of non-human interlocutors.
Yet now our gaze seems to be turning again; the uncanny and improbable events that are beating at our doors seem to have stirred a sense of recognition, an awareness that humans were never alone, that we have always been surrounded by beings of all sorts who share elements of that which we had thought to be most distinctively our own: the capacities of will, thought, and consciousness. How else do we account for the interest in the non-human that has been burgeoning in the humanities over the last decade and over a range of disciplines, from philosophy to anthropology and literary criticism.

Can the timing of this renewed recognition be mere coincidence, or is the synchronicity an indication that there are entities in the world, like forests, that are fully capable of inserting themselves into our processes of thought?
How climate change challenges and refutes Enlightenment ideas (Story 8 sq.)

For what it suggests—indeed proves—is that non-human forces have the ability to intervene directly in human thought. And to be alerted to such interventions is also to become uncannily aware that conversations among ourselves have always had other participants: it is like finding out that one’s telephone has been tapped for years, or that the neighbors have long been eavesdropping on family discussions.

But in a way it is worse still, for it would seem that those unseen presences actually played a part in shaping our discussions without our being aware of it. And if these are real possibilities, can we help but suspect that all the time that we imagined ourselves to be thinking about apparently inanimate objects, we were ourselves being “thought” by other entities?