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DISASTER IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND AND FRANCE: A LITERARY AND CULTURAL HISTORY

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by

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ABSTRACT

Brian Malone

Disaster in Nineteenth-Century England and France: A Literary and Cultural History

This dissertation is an exploration of the discourses of disaster in nineteenth-century England and France. I focus on a variety of catastrophic events that raise urgent questions about social vulnerability in this period, including floods, railway collisions, famines, and epidemics. As part of everyday life in the nineteenth century, the threat of disaster made specific demands on both individuals and social formations. My project traces the ways in which discourses of disaster became embedded in lived experience for individuals and collectives. This dissertation, then, is a phenomenological history of the disastrous nineteenth century, an exploration of how it feels to live in a time of catastrophe.

In my chapters, I focus on specific aspects of lived experience and their relationship to disaster narratives. My readings encompass a wide range of texts, including literary works, as well as scientific, journalistic, medical, and historical discourses. In the geological work of Georges Cuvier and George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, I identify a narrative logic of impending disaster and its corresponding affect of dread. Reading medical treatises alongside depictions of railway accidents by Charles Dickens, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Émile Zola, I argue for a model of disaster as a type of contagious public trauma. Finally, in a reading of *Bleak House*, I explore the incipient discourses of catastrophization and ethical responsibility that

developed during the cholera epidemics of the mid-nineteenth century. By elaborating these discourses and their genealogy in the nineteenth century, I provide a way of considering our own lived experiences in the disastrous present of the Anthropocene.

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Although writing a dissertation felt, at times, like a necessarily (and overwhelmingly) solitary activity, it is also—ultimately—a project that could not have been completed without the assistance of an increasingly large network of friends, colleagues, and mentors. Over the course of the last several years, I have been continually amazed and inspired by the generosity of many people. I recognize that this brief acknowledgement is inadequate, but I offer my thanks sincerely.

I would like to thank the members of my committee: Professor Richard Terdiman, Professor Vilashini Cooppan, Professor Carla Freccero, and Professor Dean Mathiowetz. This project would not exist without their enthusiasm, their support, and their perspicacious commentary throughout. I am particularly grateful to Vilashini for her willingness to meet with me to discuss my work, especially during the preparation for my qualifying exams. Carla has been an intellectual hero to me throughout my graduate career, and this dissertation is significantly better for her careful reading and thoughtful questions. I have found Dean's perspective as a political theorist to be extremely valuable, helping me to think more broadly about issues of disaster across disciplinary boundaries. It has been a privilege to work with such brilliant and generous scholars.

There are multiple administrative hurdles in this type of project (and in graduate school more generally). The faculty and staff of the Literature Department helped me to navigate complicated administrative terrain with patience, grace, and

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It has been my great good fortune to meet an extraordinary number of remarkable colleagues and friends during my time at UCSC. Many of them contributed to this project in important ways and I thank them for their generosity. I am grateful to Lorena Parker. Several years ago, Sara Orning gave me the fancy paper for my title page—a vote of confidence at a time when I desperately needed it. My dear friend Sophie Rollins has provided me, on a number of occasions, with translation assistance, helping me to decipher several of the most difficult and most colloquial moments in Zola and Rousseau. While my access to the university library was severely limited by administrative restrictions during the last five months, a brigade of friends and colleagues enthusiastically came to my aid, including Lisa

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Over the course of my graduate studies (especially in the last few years), a number of my dearest friends have been indispensible. They helped me to make it through my qualifying exams, puzzled through my dissertation project with me, read drafts, offered advice, and—perhaps most importantly—believed that I could do this. Their friendship has made me a better scholar and a better person. Thank you to Bonnie Rhee Andryeyev, Allison Athens, Sarah Papazoglakis, Laurel Peacock, and Michael Ursell. I love you all.

As my father occasionally (and with good humor) reminds me, my years in graduate school have been a challenge for my family as well. My father, Ken Malone, has provided me with financial support on a number of occasions during this period. I wrote this dissertation on a computer that he bought for me. I could not have completed this degree without my mother, Mary Malone, who has always offered support when I needed it—both financial and emotional. It has been a gift to spend the last eight years in California with her. She also copy-edited this entire manuscript. My partner, Ben Supnet, has been a part of my graduate career almost from the very beginning. Although he has offered key financial support (including, for several years now, health insurance), his most important contribution to my work has been that he has made me happy.

Finally, I want to dedicate this dissertation to my advisor, Dick Terdiman. We met eight years ago when he taught the proseminar for first-year graduate students.

My path after that prosem took a number of twists and turns, but several years later, when I most needed his assistance, he generously agreed to become my advisor. He is a wise interlocutor, a sophisticated theorist, an incisive editor, and a role model. I have learned much from him and he has helped me to produce work of which I am proud. His unwavering confidence in my ability to complete this dissertation was crucial—especially during bouts of self-doubt and uncertainty. Two year ago, he told me in no uncertain terms that I was going to finish my Ph.D. He was right. And it wouldn't have happened without him. Thank you, Dick.

INTRODUCTION

The Nineteenth Century and Discourses of Disaster

"[I]n her imagination she could foresee the nature of the catastrophe which might come" (257).
—Anthony Trollope, *The Way We Live Now* (1875).

In the summer and early autumn of 1834, there was a convergence of geology and literary history. In the middle of July, Mount Vesuvius, near Naples, erupted, sending "immense masses of fire, stones, and water" into the air, such that "the bright full moon became invisible" ("Intelligence from Naples" 2). A month later, the volcano erupted again, in an even more dramatic and destructive fashion. The dispatch to the *Times* that arrived in London nearly a month later reports that "[t]housands of families were seen flying from their native land, old and young, dragging through heavy masses of heated cinders. The writer of this account passed 22 hours in the midst of piercing shrieks. Fifteen hundred houses, palaces, and other buildings, and 2,500 acres of cultivated land have been destroyed by fire" ("The most afflicting details" 3). The report goes on to note that "[t]he eruption [...] surpassed every thing which history has transmitted to us" (3). The dubiousness of such a hyperbolic comparison to historical catastrophes, while far from unusual in descriptions of geological catastrophe in the popular press, would soon be underlined.

A week after the account in the *Times*, Edward Bulwer Lytton's[1] novel *The Last Days of Pompeii* was published. Lytton's novel takes place in the doomed city of

[1] The question of how to refer to the author is complicated, and not just because the novel was first published anonymously (Simmons 103). To add to the potential for

Pompeii just prior to the catastrophic eruption of Vesuvius that buried the city under mud and ash in 79 CE. In the novel, Lytton recreates a version of first century Pompeii, imagining a rich society on (or perhaps over) the verge of decadence: "[w]ithin the narrow compass of its walls was contained, as it were, a specimen of every gift which luxury offered to power. In its minute but glittering shops, its tiny palaces, its baths, its forums, its theatre, its circus—in the energy yet corruption, in the refinement yet the vice, of its people, you beheld a model of the whole empire" (29). Decades before the Decadent movement, Lytton's narrative relies on detailed descriptions of jewels, flowers, art, and rituals to conjure up a society that is devoted to sensual pleasure. Beyond the sheer joy that the narrative takes in creating a city of great visual beauty, it also takes great pains to recreate certain aspects of Roman life (architecture, the baths) in almost pedantic detail. As Easson notes, Lytton spent the winter of 1833-34 in Naples, including several visits to the ruins of Pompeii (101). His narrative makes it clear to the reader that, in the course of his travels, he had done a significant amount of historical research in an attempt to vividly resurrect Pompeii. And then he destroys it.

The eruption of Vesuvius in the novel is spectacular. The same attention that the narrative pays to the description of beautiful objects is turned toward the grandeur of the volcano. The narrative describes the lightning that plays around the cone:

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confusion, the author was known as Edward Bulwer at the time of that novel's publication. He would later become Bulwer Lytton or Bulwer-Lytton (in 1843) and then Baron Lytton (in 1866). Various critics have since referred to him as "Bulwer," "Bulwer-Lytton," "Bulwer Lytton," and "Lytton." For consistency and clarity, I have chosen to call him "Lytton" throughout.

> But in proportion as the darkness gathered, did the lightnings around Vesuvius increase in their vivid and scorching glare. Nor was their horrible beauty confined to the usual hues of fire; no rainbow ever rivalled their varying and prodigal dyes. Now brightly blue as the most azure depth of a southern sky—now of a livid and snake-like green, darting restlessly to and fro as the folds of an enormous serpent—now of a lurid and intolerable crimson, gushing forth through the columns of smoke, far and wide, and lighting up the whole city from arch to arch,—then suddenly dying into a sickly paleness, like the ghost of their own life! (393)

It is in moments like this that the narrative moves beyond its antiquarian impulses to a vision of the catastrophic sublime, an aestheticization of the power of destruction. While much of the novel's description of the eruption and the burial of Pompeii provides evidence of the archaeological and geological inquiries that Lytton made during his stay in Italy, under the tutelage of the archaeologist William Gell (Easson 102-03), it is also clear from this description that Lytton is not quite—despite his claim to the contrary—writing a "history" (409). Rather, he is celebrating disaster.

The novel was a sensation. The reading public embraced its blend of the historical and the melodramatic, the archaeological and the marvelous. The number of copies sold was "phenomenal" (Simmons 103), enjoying "the most spectacular success of any novel since [1814's] *Waverley*" (Sadleir 332). It seems likely that the convergence between Lytton's "history" and the actual history of Vesuvius's recent eruption was responsible for a portion of the novel's popularity. After all, as Simmons

suggests, the novel "received a prepublication boost that no human press agent could have equalled" (103). And yet, the popularity of Lytton's novel did not wane, even as Vesuvius returned to quiescence. Leslie Mitchell observes that the novel remained popular throughout the nineteenth century, such that, "[b]efore 1914, there were thirty-two editions of *The Last Days of Pompeii*" (xvi). Indeed, by the end of the nineteenth century, Lytton's novel remained enough of a cultural touchstone to inspire a "pyrodrama" created by James Pain and performed throughout America and Europe. As Adrian Stähli notes, the fireworks spectacle "involved three hundred extras for the crowd scenes (chariot races, a procession of priests, gladiator combats, and the destruction of the city) and promised in announcements a complete burn-down of Pompeii every evening" (81).

The extraordinary popularity of Lytton's novel was part of a larger cultural preoccupation with disaster in the nineteenth century. As Curtis Dahl has observed, *The Last Days of Pompeii* fit into a broader artistic movement that he calls the "school of catastrophe" (428). He notes that "[f]rom the 1820's through the 1840's [there] appeared a large number of poems, novels, plays, and paintings on the subject of immense disasters" (428). Lytton's novel was influenced particularly by the art of this school, especially a painting that he viewed in Milan in 1833 (a painting that Dahl has identified as by "the Russian artist Bryullov" [434]) (Figure 1).

Fig. 1. Karl Briullov, *The Last Day of Pompeii* (1830-33), State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

Lytton was clearly impressed by the picture: "It is making a considerable sensation at Milan, and the subject of it is 'The Last Days of Pompeii.' The picture is full of genius, imagination, and nature. The faces are fine, the conception grand. The statues toppling from a lofty gate have a crashing and awful effect" (V. Lytton 440). And indeed, Lytton's novel makes use of just such a falling statue "effect" during the climactic eruption, as the villainous Egyptian Arbaces is crushed (with obvious colonial symbolism) by "a tall column that supported the bronze statue of Augustus" (399). In its relation to this painting, we can locate Lytton's novel within a broader movement that took disaster as a site for artistic production.

How are we to account for this "school of catastrophe"? Dahl has traced multiple cultural currents that contributed to an increasing interest in disaster in the period, including recent advances in scientific geology and discoveries in archaeology (429-30). Additionally, he attributes a significant amount of influence to the rise of Evangelicalism. It is no accident that a significant number of works in the "school of catastrophe" were inspired by biblical events, such as the fall of Jerusalem or the destruction of Babylon. As Dahl suggests, an interest in these scenes stemmed from the increasingly common Evangelical belief that "God would terribly revenge the wrongs of his people and punish their sins" (429). In this way, many of the works in the "school of catastrophe" took an explicitly theological tone.

A significant exception, I suggest, is Lytton's novel. Although the "school of catastrophe" did often focus on classical disasters, Lytton departs from a number of his contemporaries in refusing to place such events within an explicitly Christian framework. *The Last Days of Pompeii*, despite its generally indulgent depiction of a small band of early Christians, refuses to speculate about the causes of the destructive eruption. While several characters attempt to explain the disaster in terms of theological, pagan, or natural processes, Lytton's narrative voice is clearly agnostic on the theology of disaster. For every Christian character who recognizes "the hand of God" in the eruption (386), there is a pagan character who believes in a type of subterranean evil, full of jealousy at the surface world: "the dim things below are preparing wrath for ye above—you, the young, and the thoughtless, and the beautiful" (220). And while the narrative is willing to offer multiple interpretations of the

destruction, it ultimately seems uninterested in which explanation might be most satisfying. It is much more interested in the disaster itself. While it is clear that much of the work in the "school of catastrophe" was produced within an explicitly religious worldview, there is more to these works than their religious context. It is important to read Lytton's novel—and indeed, the cultural meaning of the entire "school of catastrophe"—as doing something more than recapitulating an Evangelical worldview.

Rather, I want to suggest that Lytton's novel and the "school of catastrophe" became popular in part because of their participation in a broader cultural discourse about the presence of disaster in everyday life. Consider, for example, David Newsome's reading of the climate in England preceding the commencement of Victoria's reign in 1837: "[a] survey of the events immediately leading up to the death of William IV on 20 June 1837 and the accession to the throne of the eighteen-year-old Princess Victoria [...] would suggest that this change of monarch was the culmination of a series of disasters" (13). Newsome goes on to enumerate the "series of disasters" that produced significant public unease, including a deadly blizzard and accompanying epidemic of influenza, a riot at a public execution, increasing unemployment, and the explosion of a "boiler of a steam-vessel at Hull" which killed nineteen people (13-14).

Yet, there is no reason to believe that the years of 1836 and 1837 were more disastrous than other years in this period. In this moment, the social and economic conditions were in place to produce regular catastrophic events. The first phase of the

Industrial Revolution brought dangerous new technologies: in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, giant factories began to spring up in industrial cities, and in the early 1830s, a railway system began to cut across the English countryside (Hobsbawm *Industry* 34; 88). The early years of the century saw an explosive increase in population in England (Newsome 15-16), much of it newly concentrated in cities (Hobsbawm *Industry* 64-65). The combination of population growth and urban living provided conditions for epidemic diseases such as cholera, which made its first appearance in Europe in the early 1830s (Huet 60-61). In addition, conditions seemed ripe for political calamity. The trauma of the French Revolution was still fresh in the mind of commentators such as Thomas Carlyle, whose history of the Revolution was published in 1837. Carlyle and members of the ruling class would remain uneasy throughout much of the 1830s and 1840s, as the Chartist movement developed and became increasingly emboldened in its demands for political representation for the working class (Newsome 42-44). The sum of these developments, anxieties, and apprehensions produced a sense of potential (and occasionally actual) disaster. I want to suggest that, though the disasters that preoccupied the "school of catastrophe" were typically extraordinary and often inexplicable occurrences in ancient history, they found echoes in the experience of modern life in industrial England.

Indeed, Lytton's novel—despite its historical setting—is very much concerned with the ways in which Pompeii is not historically distant from the nineteenth century. The narrative describes the city as "a toy, a play-thing, a showbox, in which

the gods seemed pleased to keep the representation of the great monarchy of the earth, and which they afterwards hid from time, to give to the wonder of posterity;—the moral of the maxim, that under the sun there is nothing new" (29). The preserved city of Pompeii is intended, by "the gods," to serve as an object lesson to the nineteenth century about how the threat of disaster remains a constant in social life. Even across a distance of more than seventeen centuries, "there is nothing new." The novel underlines this continuity between the ancient and the modern at a number of moments in the narrative, usually in the form of asides. For example, the narrative notes the presence on the Pompeiian shore of "a Sicilian who, with vehement gestures and flexile features, was narrating to a group of fisherman and peasants a strange tale of ship-wrecked mariners and friendly dolphins:—just as at this day, in the modern neighbourhood, you may hear upon the Mole of Naples [a geographical feature of that coast]" (29). At another moment, Lytton's narrative offers an even more explicit commentary on social continuity (and, in the process, reveals the narrative's own chauvinism): "The ancient Italians were like the modern, there was nothing they would not sell, much less a poor blind girl" (114).[2]

It is not just a point about human nature or national character that Lytton's narrative wants to make, however. Pompeii is not only a version of a modern city, it is also constructed in relation to a specifically English city (i.e., London). Lytton's narrative relies on comparisons to modern English customs and experiences in order to make ancient life intelligible. The house of Glaucus is described as "a model at this

[2] We may wonder how Lytton became so convinced that nineteenth-century Italians would sell poor blind girls into slavery.

day for the house of 'a single man in Mayfair'—the envy and despair of the coelibian [sic] purchasers of buhl and marquetry" (37). Similarly, the narrative describes "the door which opened on the garden, that answered to the inhabitants of the southern cities the same purpose that a greenhouse or conservatory does to us" (57). The comparisons even extend to religious observance: "the ancient temple had been thrown down in the earthquake sixteen years before, and the new building had become as much in vogue with the versatile Pompeians as a new church or a new preacher may be with us" (50). The Pompeians, even across geographical and temporal distance, were—in a sense—just like the English.

At the most basic level, such comparisons are a way of making a historical novel accessible to modern readers by rendering a distant society intelligible in terms of shared cultural values or experiences. However, there is a more interesting consequence of Lytton's rhetorical strategy here. By mapping London onto Pompeii, Lytton's narrative makes explicit the allegorical possibilities of his tale. In that moment, the novel is no longer just a recreation of ancient Roman society, but additionally becomes readable as a representation of nineteenth-century British life. The novel then provides a potential critique of English social mores, of decadence and social inequality. But most importantly for my purposes, the novel also then constructs England in the 1830s as a society on the brink of disaster. The cataclysm that destroys Pompeii also looms over England (although, presumably, not in volcanic form). Lytton's novel is about everyday life in a society that is threatened by disaster and that remains, for the most part, blind to that fact. For all the novel's

explicit pretensions to historical authenticity, it is also a novel about the conditions of potential disaster that prevail in everyday life in contemporary England. *The Last Days of Pompeii* is more than an archaeological curiosity; rather, it provides contemporary Britain with a potential self-image as a society that is haunted by the possibility of disaster.

A Literary and Cultural History

This dissertation is a reading of the discourses of a society preoccupied with disaster. These are the narratives that cultures develop in order to understand disaster and theorize their relation to it. In these discourses, I am interested in the ways disaster is experienced as part of everyday life in the nineteenth century, how the threat of disaster makes demands—ontological, epistemological, and ethical—on individuals and social formations. In a sense, my project is related to Lytton's project, but on a larger and more analytical scale. Like Lytton, I am interested in exploring the self-understandings of a society that is threatened by disaster. My questions are similar: how does one recognize the threat of disaster? And what does one do about it?

In my brief discussion of the cultural context of *The Last Days of Pompeii*, I have already mentioned some of the ways disaster seemed to hover over early nineteenth-century Britain: political instability, population growth and poverty, urbanization and industrialization. These background conditions will form a sort of "disastrous milieu" for my readings in this work, providing a historical frame for the generally more specific and discrete events that will appear in the foreground. I will

focus on a number of distinct threats: floods, railway collisions, famines, epidemics. There is an obvious heterogeneity to the particular events that were considered disastrous in the nineteenth century (and that I will examine in this dissertation). And yet, as we shall see, all of these events raise questions about social vulnerability and both individual and collective responses to it.

England is my primarily—though not my sole—focus. This emphasis reflects my longstanding interests in English literature, as well as a significant portion of my disciplinary training. However, I would argue that, in any history of disaster in the nineteenth century, England must necessarily be a focal point as the origin and center of the Industrial Revolution (Hobsbawm *Industry* 12-13). Most—if not quite all—of the disasters that I will consider in this dissertation are entangled, in some way, with the Industrial Revolution—whether the relationship is one of direct causation (e.g., railway collisions) or part of a broader pattern of political consequences (e.g., the role of industrial capitalism and urbanization in cholera epidemics). For these reasons, we should expect England to play a large role in a comprehensive history of disaster in this period.

Despite the primary focus on England, this dissertation will also—on several occasions—consider literary and cultural developments in France.[3] My method here is not strictly comparative, but I am interested in tracing the ways disaster discourses

[3] In terms of historical period and geographical focus, this dissertation can be read as a complement to Marie-Hélène Huet's useful book, *The Culture of Disaster*. Huet's focus in that work is primarily on France in the nineteenth century, with an occasional glance at England. My project reverses her geographical priority.

migrated between London and Paris. Constant cultural exchange between the two nations means that a history of disaster in England in the nineteenth century would be difficult to separate entirely from the corresponding history in France. As we shall see, a significant share of the Enlightenment philosophy and science that dominated English discourses on disaster originated across the Channel. Similarly, the chronic anxiety about revolution that haunted England throughout the first half of the nineteenth century owed much to the memories of Paris in 1789 (Newsome 39). And, by mid-century, technological developments had made France accessible to the English (and vice versa) in a way that it had never been before. As John Hollingshead reports in a travelogue in Dickens's *All The Year Round*, an ordinary English traveler in 1859 was able to travel overnight on a "train of pleasure" (and a ferry, of course) to Paris from London—"for twenty-seven shillings by the short sea-passage route of Folkestone and Boulogne" (495).

I approach the question of disaster from perspectives both literary and cultural. Many of the texts I examine in this project are novels. Many of these novels, although not all, are canonical—indeed, there are few nineteenth-century novels more well-established in the critical tradition than *Bleak House* and *Middlemarch*. It is the very centrality of these novels to nineteenth-century literary history that makes them essential sources for my project. However, I do not read these canonical texts in isolation. Rather, my readings attempt to create a constellation between novels (both popular and more obscure) and a broader set of texts and discourses: scientific, journalistic, medical, historical. It is in the interplay between discourses that I want to

locate representations of the everyday experience of disaster in the nineteenth century. My project is the writing of a literary and cultural history of disaster.

Etymologies and Definitions

But what do I mean when I use the word "disaster"? The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that, etymologically, "disaster" comes into English from the French *désastre*. *Le Grand Robert* traces the word, which appeared in French in the middle of the sixteenth century, to the Italian word *disastro*. Each of these versions combines a prefix of negation (*dés*-, *dis*-) with a variation on the Latin word for "star" (*astrum*). As the *OED* notes, the dis-/*dés*-/*dis*- prefix is privative, implying "removal" or "negation." Thus, the etymological sense of "disaster" does not mean, as is often suggested, being doomed by a "bad" star, but is rather a condition that comes about by the absence or removal of a star. As Marie-Hélène Huet notes, disaster then "designate[s] the state of having been disowned by the stars that ensure a safe passage through life" (3). It comes about through a withdrawal of astral protection, a withdrawal that results in being left alone in the world.

The etymology of the related word, "catastrophe," can be traced into English and French from Greek, especially Greek drama. It implied an overturning of the order that had been established during the play. The traditional dramatic sense of "catastrophe" is, as the *OED* notes (quoting Johnson), "[t]he change or revolution which produces the conclusion or final event of a dramatic piece" (def. 1). By the mid-eighteenth century, the meaning of "catastrophe" had become more general,

developing beyond its dramatic origins to mean "a sudden disaster" (*OED*, def. 4). *Le Grand Robert* observes a similar shift in French.

It is possible to trace the incidence of the words "disaster" and "catastrophe" in the English and French languages from the eighteenth century to the present using the Google Books Ngram Viewer.[4] This tool allows one to graph the frequency of appearance of a word or words in a corpus of almost 5.2 million books that have been digitized as part of the Google Books project (this represents approximately 4% of all books that have ever been published) [Michel et al. 176]. This tool calculates the number of times that a word appears in texts during any given year, divided by the raw number of words in the corpus of texts for that year. This calculation controls for the fact that the number of incidences of most words have been steadily increasing from the invention of print until the current day by producing a measure of comparative frequency.

Although frequency graphs of these terms cannot explicitly specify the meaning of these words, such graphs can offer crude measures of the cultural preoccupation with these terms and can also offer hints as to the cultural concerns that coincided with their usage. What is noteworthy about the incidence of "disaster" and "catastrophe" in English is the gradual increase in the frequency of both words since the mid-eighteenth century (Figure 2).

[4] https://books.google.com/ngrams All of the graphs described here can easily be recreated at this URL.

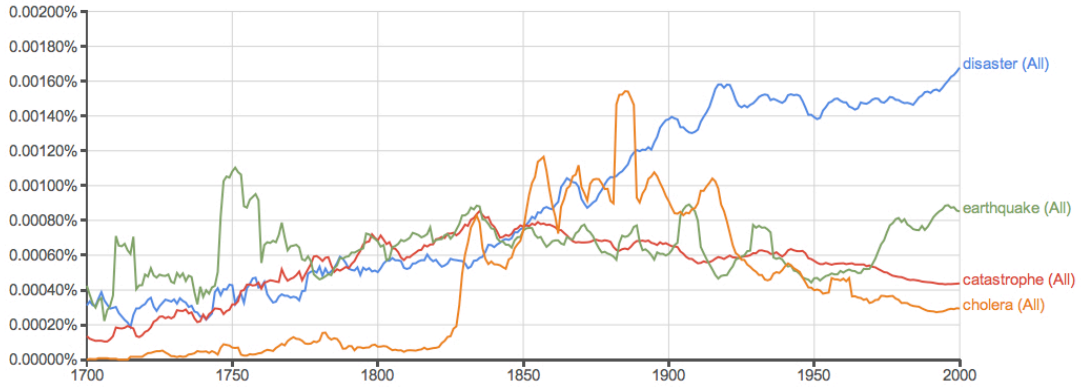

Fig. 2. Google Books Ngram frequency graph for the words "disaster," "catastrophe," "earthquake," and "cholera" (case-insensitive) in English, from 1700-2000.

Indeed, adding the word "earthquake" to the graph suggests a correspondence between the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 and an increase in incidence of both of these words. In the nineteenth century, the word "catastrophe" levels off and remains more or less stable in its frequency, while the word "disaster" shows a significant upward trajectory from about 1830 onward (mapping this word in correspondence the word "cholera" suggests a potential explanation for its upward slope over the next decade or two). In Google's corpus of French books, the significant event that inaugurates a sharp increase in the usage of both "*catastrophe*" and "*désastre*" is clearly (and unsurprisingly) the Revolution (Figure 3). Within the nineteenth century, both words more or less mirror each other's trajectories, with a gradual increase in the first part of the century, followed by fluctuations. (There are two sharp peaks in the usage of both words during the twentieth century that clearly correspond to the two wars.)

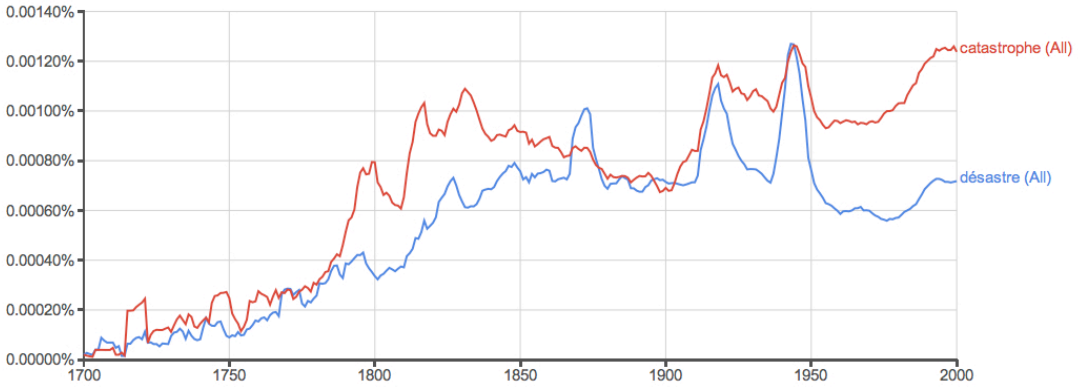

Fig. 3. Google Books Ngram frequency graph for the words "*désastre*" and "*catastrophe*" in French, from 1700-2000.

Such analyses suggest two things: first, that the usage of these words closely corresponds to the occurrence of events that we would now consider disastrous or catastrophic; and second, that at least in some ways and for part of the nineteenth century, disaster/catastrophe became an increasingly common word.

Based on the etymological definitions and bolstered suggestively by the Ngram data, I would suggest that by the nineteenth century, then, a recognizably modern definition of these two terms had stabilized and that, importantly, the meanings of these terms had converged. For this reason, throughout this work I will use the words "disaster" and "catastrophe" interchangeably. In this dissertation, a disaster or a catastrophe, then, is an event (typically sudden) that causes significant casualty or fatality. Such a definition fits comfortably with other recent definitions from both the humanities and social sciences. As Naomi Zack notes, "a core consensus hold that a disaster involves great harm to a large number of people. Still the terms also legitimately applies to sudden harm, death, or property destruction

where fewer lives are lost" (2). Similarly, legal theorist Richard A. Posner notes that disasters and catastrophes "designate an event that [...] will produce a harm so great and sudden as to seem discontinuous with the flow of events that preceded it" (6).

One of the key elements of this definition—an element that both the *OED* and *Le Grand Robert* insist on—is that a disaster or a catastrophe is an event. Indeed, in this work I will primarily be focusing on disasters that are identifiable as discrete incidents that happen at a localized moment in time: eruptions, floods, railway collisions, famines, epidemics. Although the duration of such events can vary from a few seconds (railway accidents) to a year or more (famine), each of these catastrophes can be bounded in time and space in such a way that they can be readily referred to as a singular occurrence. However, despite the consensus (both scholarly and popular) that justifies this focus on certain events as catastrophes, I also want to recognize and acknowledge an uneasiness in this conception of disaster.

Identifying a disaster as an event is an act with political consequences. The focus on sudden, discrete events elides the recognition of slow, gradual processes that can also produce catastrophic outcomes. Slavoj Žižek has called attention to this distinction and the political consequences, relying on work by Terry Eagleton:

> Eagleton has drawn our attention to the two opposed modes of tragedy: the big, spectacular catastrophic Event, the abrupt irruption from some other world, and the dreary persistence of a hopeless condition, the blighted existence that goes on indefinitely, life as one long emergency. This is the difference between the big First World catastrophes like September 11 and the

> dreary, permanent catastrophe of, say, Palestinians in the West Bank. The first mode of tragedy, the figure against the "normal" background, is characteristic of the First World; while in much of the Third World, catastrophe designates the ever-present background itself. (165)

In this passage, Žižek identifies the possibility of a catastrophe that is not, also, an event; rather, it is part of everyday existence in such a way that it becomes "background" to existence. As Žižek notes, the distinction between two types of catastrophe is linked to the history of capital, development, and colonialism. In the First World, catastrophic events are events because they are, in a sense, a surprise. In certain parts of the Third World, Žižek argues, catastrophe describes everyday experience.

It is important to note that the power of Žižek's distinction here does not necessarily depend on the fact of the inequality between nation-states that is identified in the First World/Third World dichotomy. Indeed, it is important for our purposes to consider Žižek's distinction apart from patterns of international development, because, as Mike Davis and others have suggested, the First/Third World dichotomy is not a particularly useful category of analysis for thinking about much of the nineteenth century. Davis notes that,

> when the Bastille was stormed, the vertical class divisions inside the world's major societies were *not* recapitulated as dramatic income differences *between* societies. The differences in living standards, say, between a French *sans*-

culotte and Deccan farmer were relatively insignificant compared to the gulf that separated both from their ruling classes. (*Late* 16; emphasis in original)

It was only by the end of the nineteenth century, Davis observes, that severe inequality between nation-states had become the norm. The place to look for catastrophe as an everyday, chronic condition of life in the nineteenth century is not just in the nations which would later become the Third World, but in the experiences of the impoverished within England and France as well. In a sense, Žižek's catastrophe (with a small "c") is a key element to the "disastrous milieu" of industrialization and capitalism that served as the background condition in nineteenth-century England.

There is a second and related concern with conceptualizing disaster solely as an event. We can get a hint of the issue in Posner's formulation of a disaster as "discontinuous," as a break with what came before. Posner posits disaster as what Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo calls an "axial event." For Vázquez-Arroyo, axial events are "signifiers for caesuras, of so-called watersheds, that are recast as turning points, that reset the historical continuum by disjointing the past from the present and redirecting the future in a new direction" (742-43). Such a narrative of disjunction can be problematic in that it can obscure the ways that catastrophe—despite its nature as an event—remains part of a historical continuum. There is the potential here for the excision of an axial event from the historical conditions that produced it. As Vázquez-Arroyo suggests, "[i]n the case of catastrophes, a narrative that occludes the advent of a catastrophe tends to dehistoricize and depoliticize it" (743). Narratives that posit a

disaster as an axial event, therefore, need to be carefully interrogated in order to prevent such dehistoricizing and depoliticizing constructions.

Axial Events and Disaster Discourses: Lisbon and Auschwitz

The question of the theorization of axial events is a particularly important one for my project, as the period in which I am interested—a long nineteenth century—is bounded by two such events. Modern histories of catastrophe (and indeed, many histories of modern thought more generally) typically identify and rely on two axial events: the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 and the Holocaust—often designated synecdochically as "Auschwitz."[5] As Susan Neiman notes in her history of evil, "[t]aking intellectual reactions to Lisbon and Auschwitz as central poles of inquiry is a way of locating the beginning and end of the modern" (2). Gilles Deleuze, in his 1987 course on Leibniz, refers to the same two events and draws a parallel between them:

> *Et ce tremblement de terre, si bizarre que ce soit, a eu un rôle dans l'Europe dont je ne vois d'équivalent que dans les camps de concentration nazi, à savoir: la questions qui a retenti après la guerre: comment est-il possible de croire encore en la raison une fois dit qu'il y a eu Auschwitz, et que un certain type de philosophie devenait impossible, qui avait pourtant fait l'histoire du dix-neuvième siècle. Il est très curieux que au dix-huitième siècle, ce soit le*

[5] The status of World War I as an axial event in the history of catastrophe remains a contested question. Theorists such as Neiman and Gilles Deleuze seem to overlook entirely the Great War, in order to concentrate on the horrors of World War II. Hobsbawm, in contrast, combines World War I and World War II into a single event, which he calls the "Age of Catastrophe" (*Age* 6).

> *tremblement de terre de Lisbonne qui assume quelque chose de cela, où toute l'Europe s'est dite: comment est-il encore possible de maintenir un certain optimisme fondé sur Dieu.* ("*changement de bande*" section, para. 4; sic throughout)
>
> This earthquake, strange as it may seem, had such a role in Europe that I see no equivalent except for the Nazi concentration camps and the questions that rang out after the war: how is it still possible to believe in reason after Auschwitz? Has a certain type of philosophy become impossible, even though it had formed the history of the nineteenth century? It is very curious that in the eighteenth century, it was the Lisbon earthquake that assumed something like that line of questioning, in which all of Europe asked itself: how is it still possible to maintain a certain optimism founded upon God? (my translation)

In the intellectual history of modern Europe, Deleuze identifies these two events as moments in which certain questions became urgent, questions about the dominant axioms in philosophical thought at the moment each event occurred. It is these two events—and the questions that they raise—that loosely bracket the nineteenth century.

Following Deleuze's lead, I want to read these two catastrophic events not quite as axial events, but as sets of discourses that cluster around specific events. As axial events, there is a temporal specificity to Lisbon and Auschwitz; they are events that took place at discrete moments in universal time. In contrast, as nodes around which certain discourses coalesce, these events offer ways of identifying, naming, and

tracing discourses that can exceed the temporal specificity of 1755 or 1945. I want to suggest that these axial events can also serve as names for discourses that would have been in circulation—in some version—in the nineteenth century. In one sense, Auschwitz was an event in the history of disaster; however, in another sense, many of the discourses that we identify as belonging to the event of Auschwitz actually pre-date that event. There are, I would suggest, prefigurations of the discourse of disaster that we now name as "Auschwitz" in previous disasters in the nineteenth century. If these events—Lisbon and Auschwitz—are poles, I want to consider the nineteenth century as a type of field in which the influences of the discourses associated with these poles are operative—either as echoes of a past event (Lisbon) or pre-echoes of a future event (Auschwitz).

What, then, are the discourses of Lisbon and how did they come about? The Lisbon earthquake struck on All Saint's Day, November 1, 1755. The trembling itself, according to T.D. Kendrick's classic history of the earthquake, supposedly lasted almost ten minutes (45)—a duration that must seem unimaginably long to those of us who have lived through the much shorter earthquakes of recent memory in California.[6] The tremor was followed by a large fire and by a tsunami, both of which significantly increased the damage and death toll (Kendrick 54-58). However, it remains extremely difficult to estimate the number of casualties. Alvaro S. Pereira has noted that estimates—both historical and contemporary—have ranged from ten thousand to one hundred thousand (468). Kendrick suggests that "[w]hat seems to be

[6] Including the South Napa earthquake that struck Northern California days before my submission of this dissertation, lasting approximately twenty seconds.

the best and most careful estimates agree that probably between ten thousand to fifteen thousand people lost their lives in Lisbon out of a population in the neighbourhood of 275,000" (59).

As Deleuze has suggested, the destruction of Lisbon sent a shock through the rest of Europe. It was a city that was both rich and famous, the center of a colonial empire. Kendrick notes that it was "justly famous for its wealth, and because of its commercial activity it was one of the best known cities in the world" (51). In a radio talk for children delivered in 1931, Walter Benjamin contends that "[t]he destruction of Lisbon in 1755 was roughly equivalent to the destruction of London or Chicago today" ("Lisbon" 536). In order to draw attention to the importance of Lisbon, Neiman contrasts that earthquake with the devastating quake that occurred fifty years earlier in Port Royal, Jamaica. She notes that, in that case, "[n]o conceptual damage occurred" to the worldview of most Europeans (241). But Lisbon was different. After all, the rest of Europe could not help but notice that disaster had leveled a European capital, not some distant colonial outpost.

In addition, the timing of the disaster was crucial. Neiman continues: "Lisbon was a more natural candidate than Port Royal for intellectual disaster, for by the time it occurred, the Enlightenment was well underway. The earthquake shook up fertile ground. It didn't create debate out of nothing but happened in the middle of it" (242). In an important way, the effect of the Lisbon earthquake on intellectual and cultural history owes much of its impact to its timing. The Enlightenment provided a cultural

context—a set of discourses—that could be used to think about the disaster in a new way.

What were these discourses that clustered around the Lisbon earthquake? I want to consider three strands that together, I would suggest, constitute a more or less coherent understanding of disaster and its place in the world in the wake of Lisbon. As Neiman notes, not all of these discourses were produced by the cultural shock of the earthquake, rather, these were discourses that were energized by or more fully developed in response to the catastrophe.

The first discourse that became associated with the Lisbon earthquake is the challenge to certain aspects of the theodicy of Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz. Writing almost fifty years before the Lisbon earthquake, Leibniz offered a justification for the presence of suffering in the world. We do not need to consider his complete argument in detail; however, for my purposes, the important point is that Leibniz's argument was dependent on the premise that all suffering was deserved, a type of punishment. For Leibniz, Neiman observes, "[n]atural evil is the pain and suffering we experience in [the world]. Moral evil is the crime for which natural evil is the certain and inevitable punishment. The assumption that moral and natural evils are causally linked is an assumption Leibniz never subjected to scrutiny" (22). It was the link between sin and suffering that became one of several assumptions targeted by Voltaire, who famously attempted to demolish Leibniz's theodicy in the wake of the earthquake. In Voltaire's *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*, he angrily addresses a Leibniz-ian interlocutor:

Direz-vous, en voyant cet amas de victimes,

Dieu s'est vengé, leur mort est le prix de leurs crimes?

Quel crime, quelle faute ont commis ces enfants,

Sur le sein maternel écrasés et sanglants?

Lisbonne qui n'est plus, eut-elle plus de vices

Que Londre, que Paris, plongés dans les délices?

Lisbonne est abîmée, et l'on danse à Paris. (17-23)

Do you say, seeing this pile of victims,

That God is avenged? Their death is the price for their crimes?

What crime, what sin has been committed by these children

Lying broken and bloody on the maternal breast?

Had Lisbon, which no longer exists, more vices

Than London or Paris, steeped in pleasures?

Lisbon is destroyed, yet they dance in Paris. (my translation)

Voltaire's argument here, as he severs the link between natural disaster and sin, gestures toward a world in which suffering is contingent. Lisbon is destroyed, yet Paris is not. And there is no apparent reason why that is the case. These lines from Voltaire's poem are a crystallization of a discourse that posits natural disaster as potentially independent of any controlling intelligence.

There is a related consequence of Voltaire's move here, a consequence that develops into the second strand of what I am calling the Lisbon discourse. If the cause of natural disaster is indeed natural, then there is the possibility that it can be

understood. In the year after the Lisbon earthquake, Immanuel Kant published three essays that explored this possibility in the context of the earthquake itself (Larsen 362). In his radio talk, Benjamin focuses on Kant's enthusiastic interest in the Lisbon earthquake, noting that "[a]t the time of the earthquake he was a young man of twenty-four, who had never left his hometown of Königberg—and who would never do so in the future. But he eagerly collected all the reports of the earthquake that he could find" ("Lisbon" 538). As Svend Erik Larsen notes, something in Kant's tone and method changed in his considerations of the Lisbon disaster: "the speculative methods and sarcastic rebuffs of the logical deficiencies in the arguments of other scholars have disappeared in favour of meticulous reports on empirical details of the widespread effects of the disaster across the continent together with cautious suggestions of causal explanations" (362). Larsen refers to this change as Kant's "scientific turn," a willingness to speculate about the natural world based on empirical observation and experience (359). Benjamin goes one step further. He suggests that Kant's work on the Lisbon earthquake "probably represents the beginnings of scientific geography in Germany. And certainly the beginnings of seismology" ("Lisbon" 538). Natural disaster is brought into the Enlightenment as a phenomenon that is intelligible through the application of empirical observation and human reason.

In addition to severing disaster from a theological worldview and subsuming it into an explicitly scientific framework, the Lisbon earthquake produced a third development in a recognizably modern understanding of disaster. This third development finds its clearest expression in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 1756 *"Lettre à*

Voltaire sur la Providence." For my purposes, the key passage in Rousseau's letter is that in which he describes why the Lisbon earthquake produced so many fatalities:

> *Sans quitter vôtre sujet de Lisbonne convenez que la nature n'avoit point rassemblé là vingt mille maisons de six à sept étages, et que si ses habitans eussent été dispersés plus également et plus légérement logés le dégat eut été beaucoup moindre et peut être nul. Combien de malheureux ont péri pour vouloir prendre l'un ses habits, l'autre ses papiers, l'autre son argent, ne sait on pas que la personne de chaque homme est devenue la moindre partie de lui-même et que ce n'est presque pas la peine de la sauver quand on a perdu tout le reste*. (73)
>
> Without leaving your subject of Lisbon, admit that had nature not gathered there twenty thousand houses of six or seven floors, and that if the inhabitants had been more evenly dispersed and more lightly accommodated, the damage would have been much less—or perhaps even zero. How many unfortunates perished for wanting to take their clothes, their papers, their money? For isn't it known that the personhood of each man has become the least part of him and that it is almost not worth saving it when one has lost everything else? (my translation)

Rousseau's obvious sarcasm at the end of this passage should not obscure his contention here that, regardless of the shaking of the ground, the scale of the damage of the earthquake was due—in large part—to entirely social factors, such as the population density, the construction of the city's buildings, and affective responses of

the victims (fear, greed). A portion of Rousseau's argument here is sadly familiar in our modern experience, as we now know well how differences in building codes and population density can produce vastly different death tolls for earthquakes of the same magnitude (Jackson 1911). At first glance, Rousseau's condemnation of the victims who remained near the ruins of their homes—for, he suggests, purely material reasons—seems somewhat cruel, a version of blaming the victim. However, despite Rousseau's apparent callousness here, it is important to recognize the innovation in his argument. As Huet notes, "[t]he shifting of responsibility from nature's blind force to men's corrupted blindness and greed inaugurates a new version of disasters"—a version that is marked by "the gradual disparition of the concept of purely natural disasters" (53). At the same moment that natural disaster becomes entirely natural (i.e., not caused by a supernatural agent), it also becomes partially social.

The discourse of disaster that is derived from the Lisbon earthquake, produced in the combination of the writings of Voltaire, Kant, and Rousseau, is a-theological, (proto-)scientific, and attentive to the ways that social formations produce or exacerbate damage. There is a version of this type of discourse in Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii*. I have already suggested that Lytton's novel is more or less agnostic on the question of the theology of disaster, in that he refuses throughout to explicitly ascribe the eruption to the will of god. But his reliance on a discourse of rationality goes even further. On several occasions, the narrative notes the predictive power of empirical observation—a power that could have saved the residents of Pompeii. The narrative describes Vesuvius in repose, "with the shadows, now dark, now light,

betraying the mossy caverns and ashy rocks, which testified the past conflagrations, and might have prophesied—but man is blind—that which was to come!" (143). All that was necessary to predict the future eruption, the narrative suggests, is the ability to read geologically—to notice and understand the signs of past eruptions and to draw inferences about what that means for the future. But even without such specific geological knowledge, the narrative suggests that there were signs that a less astute observer should have recognized. In the wake of an earthquake (which precedes the eruption by several weeks), "the lively Pompeians forgot even that there had gone forth so terrible a warning of their approaching doom" (183). Lytton's narrative relies here on a specific narrative of geological disturbance as a type of predictive knowledge—a discourse that follows from a scientific approach to disaster, an approach based on careful empirical observation.

There is even a Rousseau-ian element to Lytton's narrative, a suggestion of the ways the behaviors of the victims during the disaster contributed to their own demise. There are the numerous citizens who choose to hole up in their homes instead of fleeing. There are the thieves who remain in the streets in order to collect more treasure. And there are the citizens who find themselves on the shore, intending to escape by sea (which, indeed, our heroes Glaucus and Ione successfully do), only to be turned away by "the agitation and preternatural shrinking of the element, the gasping forms of the uncouth sea things which the waves had left upon the sand" (402). In this moment, Lytton's novel gestures toward the interaction between natural disaster and social motivations that produces casualty. It suggests that the

contingency of survival—even in the face of a massive geological disaster—is not solely based on non-human factors.

The Lisbon discourse offers a way of thinking about disasters such that an intervention is possible: to predict the disaster, to prevent it from happening, or—if it is unavoidable—to diminish its effects. Disaster becomes a social problem, a question of how social formations create, recognize, and relate to their own vulnerability. Huet has argued that the history of disaster since the Lisbon earthquake is "a history of the politicization of disaster, the emancipation of disasters from nature to the *socius*" (8). Such a political or sociological discourse of disaster runs through many of my readings in this dissertation. Disaster in the nineteenth century was often a social/political problem that required administrative or technological responses, from the public health reforms designed to prevent and contain epidemics to the complicated signaling systems that were developed to avert railway collisions. Indeed, this discourse remains the prevailing model in contemporary social sciences and public policy in our own period. As Posner notes, "the social sciences, in particular economics, statistics, cognitive psychology, and law, have an essential role to play in the design of policies and institutions for combating [catastrophic risks]" (v).

Yet, perhaps the rationality of this discourse cannot entirely contain an event like the Lisbon earthquake. Werner Hamacher, in a reading of the discourses that surrounded the earthquake, suggests that "[t]he figure of the earthquake bears the marks of its irrational, uncontrollable, and unsurpassable character" (264). The

discourses of Voltaire, Kant, and Rousseau inaugurate a project to construct disaster as a natural and social fact, separating the earthquake from an allegorical understanding that carries meaning beyond what is readily observable. However, as Hamacher suggests, this project cannot ultimately succeed in ridding disaster of its metaphorical connotations. He argues that "the earthquake does not entirely escape the framework of its metaphoricity" (264). There is, then, a surplus of potential meaning that remains attached to this disaster, beyond the reach of the rationalistic discourses that were developed to attempt to account for it.

I want to suggest that this residue of metaphoricity reappears in the discourse of disaster that sprang up in the shadow of World War II. This is not to say that the war was not a disaster in a literal sense. It was clearly an unprecedented disaster in terms of mass casualty. But it was also a metaphorical disaster, a disaster for rationality and for civilization. As Anson Rabinbach argues, the Second World War raised an unavoidable question for thinkers as to "how the logic of modernity since the Enlightenment, with its legacy of progress, secularism, and rationalism, could not be exculpated from events that seemed to violate its ideals" (9). For many German and French intellectuals, World War II was a disaster for the Enlightenment project itself. The first two sentences of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* present the case starkly: "In the most general sense of progressive thought, the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and

establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant" (3).[7]

In this discourse, World War II—and more particularly, Auschwitz—signifies a break in the history of the West, a break that completely forecloses the possibility of a return to the Enlightenment project. Rabinbach credits Hannah Arendt as the originator of this discourse; she "was perhaps the first philosopher to recognize the *Shoah* as a rupture with civilization, as an event that was catastrophic and apocalyptic without being in any sense redemptive" (11). But it is not only Arendt who would see in Auschwitz a vision of an apocalypse, an end to the European self-image. In addition to Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of the Enlightenment, philosophers and thinkers such as Jean-François Lyotard and Maurice Blanchot would develop similar discourses (Rabinbach 13).[8] All of these discourses, then, would participate in what Derrida has called "un ton apocalyptique en philosophie" ("an apocalyptic tone in philosophy"; *D'un ton* 9).

I want to take a moment here to consider Blanchot in particular. Contemporary explorations of disaster frequently cite Blanchot and his work,

[7] John Cumming translates the German word "*Unheils*" as disaster. Although *Unheil* connotes a much more general class of damaging event than, for example, the word *Katastrophe*, I would suggest that Horkheimer and Adorno's indictment of the disastrous failure of the Enlightenment is clear.

[8] Although Heidegger expressed little concern about the Holocaust, he too suggested that the Second World War had brought an end to a certain history of Western thought, a "primordial 'Greek' beginning of the West that had reached its denouement" (Rabinbach 17).

L'écriture du désastre.[9] However, in these works disaster theorists seem to only cite Blanchot in passing, as if they are unsure how to account for him or how to bring his concerns into their argument.[10] This relative lack of attention to Blanchot is understandable. *L'écriture du désastre* is an extremely difficult text: fragmentary, poetic, terse yet digressive. The text's intention is clearly not to provide a philosophical treatise or comprehensive essay on disaster. And yet, I do think it is worth trying to understand Blanchot's project and its relation to the concept of disaster. I thus want to offer a reading of Blanchot that outlines his approach and what it might offer to my discussion.

One of the challenges of *L'écriture du désastre* is that the referent of the word *désastre* never seems secure in the text. What is the disaster of which Blanchot speaks? As Leslie Hill points out, there is an ambiguity in Blanchot's deployment of the term: "is disaster in the title a specific, determined event, like some historical catastrophe[...]? Or is it something indeterminate, a kind of prior condition of impossibility separating everything from its proper realisation?" (63). The answer, I want to suggest, is that it means both. Blanchot speaks of "*[l]'holocauste, événement* absolu *de l'histoire, historiquement daté, cette toute-brûlure où toute l'histoire s'est embrasée, où le mouvement du Sens s'est abîmé [...]. Comment le garder, fût-ce dans la pensée, comment faire de la pensée ce qui garderait l'holocauste où tout s'est*

[9] In her English edition, translator Ann Smock has rendered the title of this work as *The Writing of the Disaster*. However, as Leslie Hill notes, the text "might equally have been called in English *The Writing of Disaster, Writing Disaster*, even *Disaster Writing*" (63).

[10] Huet's book, to consider one recent example (and one, moreso, that is focused primarily on French texts), devotes two paragraphs to *L'écriture du désastre*.

perdu, y compris la pensée gardienne?" ("the holocaust, the *absolute* event of history, dated in history, that all-burn where all history was set ablaze, where the movement of Meaning was ruined [....]. How to keep it, even in thought? How to keep the holocaust in thought, even though all is lost—including guardian thought?"; *L'écriture* 80; *Writing* 47, translation modified). For Blanchot, then, the disaster is an event—the Holocaust, perhaps above all—that occurred on a date in history ("*historiquement daté*"). Yet, the question is also what that historical event has done to thought. How does one think when the disaster has ruined the possibility of meaning, has destroyed the possibility of thought?

Blanchot's understanding of the disaster—and he strenuously insists on this—must be held outside of the dialectic. For Blanchot, the death of Western rationality (the death of meaning, of thought) means the death of dialectical thinking. He rejects any attempt to bring the disaster into history; rather, it is the ultimate caesura that ends any possibility of something that might be called progress. Blanchot is attempting to map out an alternative to the Hegelian movement of understanding, of a consciousness that aspires to an increasing comprehension and mastery of the world. He asserts that "[*s]eul le désastre tient à distance la maîtrise*" ("the disaster alone holds mastery at a distance"; *L'écriture* 20; *Writing* 9). The disaster cannot be brought into a coherent narrative of the world or of consciousness; it cannot be mastered. In this move, Blanchot turns away from what Arkady Plotnitsky identifies as "the core of everything in Hegel: the tremendous power of dialectic [...] to face the radical—absolute—discontinuity and then to master it" (243).

The process by which this mastery occurs in G. W. F. Hegel is the move of dialectical sublation, the *Aufhebung*, which "convert[s] absolute rupture into absolute continuum" (Plotnitsky 243). Yet, for Blanchot, it is in the face of disaster that the *Aufhebung* is arrested. This is the moment "*quand s'arrête l'Aufhebung devenue l'inoperable*" ("when the *Aufhebung* turns inoperable, ceases "; *L'écriture* 69; *Writing* 40, translation modified). But without the operation of the dialectic, Blanchot suggests, the disaster cannot be brought into human experience. The disaster is "*ce qui se soustrait à toute possibilité d'expérience—limite de l'écriture*" ("that which escapes the very possibility of experience—it is the limit of writing"; *L'écriture* 17; *Writing* 7, translation modified). Neither thought nor writing can capture the disaster. Nor can writing intervene. As Blanchot argues, "*[q]uand écrire, ne pas écrire, c'est sans importance, alors l'écriture change—qu'elle ait lieu ou non; c'est l'écriture du désastre*" ("when to write, or not to write makes no difference, then writing changes—whether it happens or not; it is the writing of the disaster"; *L'écriture* 25; *Writing* 12). Writing, in the face of the disaster, does not matter: it either happens or it does not. The disaster, then, reduces experience and writing to a type of passivity.

And indeed, "*la passivité*" is precisely what remains in the face of disaster—passivity as a type of numb, desubjectified existence (30). Agency, in a disastrous world, is not longer an adequate response. As Blanchot suggests, "*[l]a passivité est une tâche—cela dans le langage autre, celui de l'exigence non dialectique—, de même que la négativité est une tâche: cela quand la dialectique nous propose l'accomplissement de tous les possibles*" ("passivity is a task—in another language,

that of a nondialectical demand—in the same way that negativity is a task in the language in which the dialectic proposes to us the fulfillment of all possibilities"; *L'écriture* 48; *Writing* 27, translation modified). Passivity is a nondialectical counterpart to the task of negativity in the dialectic. However, passivity becomes the appropriate orientation toward the world when the dialectic fails, when the metaphysical and ethical certainties of Western philosophy collapse—"*quand l'éthique à son tour devient folle, comme elle doit l'être*" ("when ethics goes mad in its turn, as it must"; *L'écriture* 48; *Writing* 27). In such a mad world, there is only:

> *La passivité opposée à l'activité, voilà le champ toujours restreint de nos réflexions. Le subir, le subissement—pour former ce mot qui n'est qu'un doublet de subitement, le même mot écrasé—, l'immobilité inert de certains états, dits de psychose, le pâtir de la passion, l'obéissance servile, la réceptivité nocturne que suppose l'attente mystique, le dépouillement donc, l'arrachement de soi à soi-même [...].* (30)
>
> Passivity opposed to activity: this is the ever-restricted field of our reflections. Subjection, *le subissement*—to coin a word that shares an etymological relation with "*subitement*" [suddenly], the same word overwritten—is the inert immobility of certain states, said to be psychoses: the suffering of passion, servile obedience, the nocturnal receptivity assumed of mystics. The stripping and wrenching, then, of the self from the self. (*Writing* 15, translation modified)

This is Blanchot's vision of the world in the wake of the disaster, a restricted world in which the dialectic has been rendered inoperable and ethics has gone mad. It is a vision of total abjection, a loss of the self that is analogous to certain psychotic or mystical states.

I want to suggest that Blanchot's project here is an attempt to think, borrowing Rabinbach's term, a "nonredemptive" apocalypse (11). Blanchot is gesturing toward a disastrous end that cannot be recuperated or sublated by the dialectic to produce a next step. Rather, Blanchot attempts to imagine the possibility of an apocalypse of meaning—an apocalypse in which meaning itself is abolished. It is in this destruction of meaning that the specific historical disasters become the apocalypse of Western metaphysics. Petar Radamanovic summarizes this aspect of Blanchot's project:

> By disaster Blanchot *means* the Holocaust, Hiroshima, and refers also to the newer bombs which destroy forms of life, leaving inanimate matter intact. He *means* that the human ability to destroy is far ahead of its ability to create. He *means* that the human has achieved a destructive absolute and can eradicate life on Earth, life as we know it, several times over. But what is the meaning of this meaning? How can it have any significance if significance is derived from containment and yet containment of disaster is not possible? How can there be meaning if it requires a shelter and there is nothing that can shield the human from catastrophe? (para. 36; emphasis in original)

The disaster in history has produced a disaster in thought. And in the face of such a crisis of meaning, Blanchot argues, the only possible response is passivity, a subjection before the disaster that will come (and that, in a sense, is already here).

While Blanchot's ultimate reliance on a type of passivity may seem somewhat extreme, the apocalypticism of his discourse is well in line with the discourse of disaster that clusters around the historical event of World War II and the Holocaust. I want to suggest that this discourse is defined by a despair with the Enlightenment and with the world that has been produced by rationality, accompanied by an apocalyptic tone—a sense that an apocalypse is imminent or has already arrived. Considering that my focus in this dissertation is almost entirely on the nineteenth century, we might expect not to encounter a discourse like Blanchot's in this period. Blanchot's despair would seem out of place in the nineteenth century.

Yet, this does not mean that there are not precursors to Blanchot's apocalypticism in the works of this period—that is, hints or pre-echoes of the discourse of disaster that become increasingly urgent as the horrific disasters of the twentieth century approach. I am thinking here of the sense of impending and apocalyptic doom that hovers over the discourses of natural disaster in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* or in Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii*. Indeed, there is a moment at the very end of Lytton's novel where he seems to repudiate his earlier suggestions (both implied and explicit) about the similarities between Pompeii and modern society, gesturing toward a type of apocalyptic caesura between the modern world and "[Pompeii as] a social system which has passed from the world for ever"

(409). I am also thinking here of the discourses of distrust around railway technologies, and the increasing disquiet—over the course of the nineteenth century—with the future that technology presages. Despite an apparent dominance of the nineteenth century by a "Lisbon discourse" of rational accommodation to disaster, I want to suggest the less obvious current of an anti-Enlightenment apocalypticism that runs throughout the century as well.

Living With Disaster

At this point, it should be clear that both of these discourses can be read as a type of critique. Indeed, that's why they were both developed. The Lisbon discourse is a critique of theodicy, of superstition, and of a certain tradition of thought. It was deployed to support (among other things) social science and, as we shall see later, a number of different versions of social reform. The Auschwitz discourse, in contrast, developed as a critique of the very values of the Enlightenment and social science—of the roles of technology and rationality in human life. And yet, I am not primarily interested in these discourses for their critical power. Instead, I want to concentrate on the ways they become embedded in lived experience, how they describe the experience of existing in a disastrous present—the kind of present that Lytton constructs (and disguises under a veneer of historical detail) in *The Last Days of Pompeii*. As we saw earlier, Huet has suggested that, in the nineteenth century, disaster becomes an essential characteristic of the social field. It enters into and then structures social life. But it does so in ways that go well beyond Huet's primary emphasis on political systems and challenges to "the civil authority responsible for

ensuring the well-being of citizens" (8). Huet offers, to a large extent, a political and administrative history of disaster. My project is, in contrast, a phenomenological history: an exploration of the ways in which disaster is experienced by individuals and collectives. In an important sense, I am interested in how it *feels* to live in a time of disaster.

The two strands of disaster discourse that I have identified in this chapter will serve as a type of scaffold for my analyses. However, they will not do so primarily as critiques of religion or the Enlightenment. Rather, I am interested in how they structure experience. I am interested in the Lisbon discourse for the ways it allows individuals and collectives to consider disaster as a social problem—as a problem that they experience with other people and that might, under the right conditions, be solved. Similarly, I am interested in the apocalyptic discourse of Blanchot as a way of suggesting that disaster is looming and that it may well mean the end of the world as we know it. My readings of disaster, then, will take place in a field of experience that is shaped by these discourses.

However, my analyses will go beyond these two specific discourses. These discourses remain present—often in the background—throughout, but I am not interested in merely identifying and noting their presence as they hover around the many disasters that I will consider. Rather, I want to suggest that there is a greater richness and depth to the lived experience of disaster in the nineteenth century, a richness and depth that goes beyond the simple identification and magnification of these two strands of discourse. In my readings, I will focus on questions of the

experience of disaster that may or may not have direct and obvious relationships to these discourses: questions of temporality, affect, trauma, and ethical responsibility. It is with attention to such a broad field of experience that I hope to elaborate on life in the disastrous nineteenth century.

Each of the chapters in this dissertation asks a specific set of phenomenological or experiential questions about disaster. Chapter 1 focuses on the temporality: the relation of past and future catastrophes to the lived present. I read George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* in relation to late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century French geology. In the first part of this chapter, I identify in the geological "*catastrophisme*" of Georges Cuvier a logic of cyclical disaster. Cuvier's work, I argue, provides a worldview in which the threat of geological destruction always looms over the present. In the second part of this chapter, I read Eliot's novel as an attempt to domesticate Cuvier's *catastrophisme* by bringing it into the sphere of individual experience. My work in this chapter is interested in the ways that disaster seems to loom over the present and the narrative and affective consequences that correspond to that dread.

Chapter 2 is concerned with railway collisions. I discuss how the regular occurrence of railway disaster and its constant threat produced a type of public trauma in the nineteenth century. I examine how Dickens and the reporters and essayists who wrote for his journals created a specific type of traumatic discourse around the railways and their dangers that promoted railway disaster as a spectacle. Following the trajectory of the nineteenth century, I begin to trace a darker discourse

of railway disaster—as the *fin de siècle* approaches—in works by Robert Louis Stevenson and Émile Zola that betrays a fascination with the possibilities of technological destruction and a potential desire for disaster.

In the third chapter, I turn to cholera and the series of epidemics that terrified Europe from the 1830s through the early 1850s. The epidemic, in England, sparked serious debate about the role of the state in the lives of citizens. However, the catastrophe of cholera was not solely an administrative challenge. It also raised questions about the ethical responsibilities that English citizens had to their fellows—both within England and in the colonies. In this chapter, I consider the ways the cholera disaster forced an urgent consideration of what English citizens owed to each other and how those questions related to broader concerns with foreign philanthropy and the ongoing British colonial project. I read Dickens's *Bleak House* as a novel that wrestles with and, ultimately, fails to resolve these questions.

In my Epilogue, I turn from the nineteenth century to our own disastrous twenty-first century. I end this dissertation, perhaps fittingly, with a meditation on our culture's own relation to disaster in the form of a final disaster: the End. I return again to the questions of lived experience—of temporality, affect, ethics—in an era in which we are being forced to recognize our own responsibility for an increasingly catastrophic future. How then does the experience of disaster in the nineteenth century relate to life in our self-consciously Anthropocene moment? How have the nineteenth-century narratives changed? What narratives remain available to us? And how do we live increasingly oriented—as we are—toward a final disaster?

CHAPTER 1

The Catastrophist Worlds of Georges Cuvier and George Eliot:

Narrative, Temporality, and Affect

"*Nous sommes au bord du désastre sans que nous puissions le situer dans l'avenir: il est plutôt toujours déjà passé, et pourtant nous sommes au bord ou sous la menace, toutes formulations qui impliqueraient l'avenir si le désastre n'était ce qui ne vient pas, ce qui a arrêté tout venue."*
"We are on the edge of disaster without being able to situate it in the future: it is rather always already past, and yet we are on the edge or under threat, all formulations which would imply the future—that which is yet to come—if the disaster were not that which does not come, that which has put a stop to every arrival."
—Maurice Blanchot (*L'écriture* 7; *Writing* 1).

In my Introduction, I offered a reading of Blanchot's *L'écriture du désastre* that focused on his use of the word disaster and its relation to more straightforward understandings of that word. I placed Blanchot's use of that word within a genealogy that traces disaster from the Enlightenment into the twentieth century. In this chapter, I begin with the above quotation from Blanchot, using it as a starting point to consider the temporality of disaster in the nineteenth century. My readings in this chapter will take place within the field of relations that Blanchot demarcates here: a complex interplay between temporalities that we call the past and future.

Blanchot is describing a very specific kind of temporal experience here, a mode of temporality that is organized around disaster. For Blanchot, there is a duality about the location of disaster in time. The disaster is something that belongs to the past. It has "*toujours déjà*" occurred. And yet, we are right now on the brink of disaster. It looms from the future, threatening us in the present (though, as Blanchot

notes, it will not come). To speak of disaster as located simultaneously both in the past and in the future is not to make a claim about the possibility of an objective dating of catastrophic occurrence, a locating of its appearance using a calendar or an atomic clock. Rather, I read Blanchot's claim here as a claim about temporality as we can distinguish that term from time. For David Hoy, "time" is a term that "can be used to refer to universal time, clock time, or objective time. In contrast, 'temporality' is time insofar as it manifests itself in human existence" (xiii). Temporality is a human or lived experience; it is how time is experienced in our lives. In my reading of Blanchot's quotation, then, I would argue that our understanding of disaster is fundamentally bound to our experiences of temporality—specifically experiences of the past and of the future.

The first temporal orientation here is what I call a traumatic model.[1] This is an orientation that is focused on the ways the past remains active in the present—a past, then, that refuses to remain firmly in the past. Such a temporal bleeding of past into present can be extraordinarily unsettling. As Richard Terdiman notes, "our present is still not on easy terms with how the past endures" (*Present* vii). Although Terdiman here is referring all aspects of the past, to individual traumas and to collective struggles, there is no question that disasters are signal experiences that cannot be fully quarantined.

In this traumatic view, a disaster is a past experience that cannot help but also inhabit the present. We can see this model in Walter Benjamin's evocation of the

[1] I discuss the relationship between disaster and trauma in more detail in Chapter 2.

“angel of history,” whose “face is turned toward the past” and who sees history as “one single catastrophe” ("Theses" 257). This catastrophe of history is what forces the angel forward into the future, even though, as Benjamin notes, the angel sees only the wreckage of the past. However, as Hoy notes, this wreckage of the past does not remain in the past: "as the storm blows the angel backward, the debris is not strewn out in the receding distance, but accompanies him, piling up at his feet. The present is not 'empty'" (155). The catastrophe of history, what happens in the past that blows the angel (backward, and thus blindly) into the future, deposits its wreckage at the feet of the angel. The present still contains the traces of past disaster. In this traumatic temporal orientation, catastrophe inhabits both the past and the present.

The second temporality of disaster is in the space of the future. As Blanchot notes, we are always on the brink of a disaster that will (not) come. I am tempted here to read Blanchot's temporal orientation toward the future as an echo of Heidegger. For Heidegger, Dasein "temporalizes itself *primarily* in terms of the *future*" (479). A temporal orientation toward the future is part of the ontology of Dasein, although this futurity may be covered up or ignored in everyday existence (385-86). The lived experience of an authentic Dasein, then, takes its meaning from the future, a moment of the future that gives meaning to the present. This moment, for Heidegger, is death. As Robert J. Dostal notes, "what the future holds for any and every Dasein is death. Another definition of Dasein is thus provided: being-toward-death" (156). In this brief excursus of Heidegger, I want to call attention to the way a future event—and death is always, until the very instant of its arrival, in the future—provides meaning

and structure for the present. Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to perform a comprehensive reading of Heidegger on temporality, both Heidegger and Blanchot provide a way of thinking about temporal orientation toward disaster: an orientation in which our present experience is attuned to and, perhaps, given meaning by, a disaster that is (perhaps always) in the future. We remain under its futural threat, even if it will not come. In this temporality, the disaster that we are waiting for has already invaded our experience of the present.

In this chapter, I want to think about both of these temporal orientations—toward the past and toward the future—and consider the ways that they operate simultaneously in the discourse of disaster. I read this temporal simultaneity of disaster in two sets of texts. First, I read the narratives of disaster produced by late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century natural historians, focusing in particular on the work of the French anatomist Georges Cuvier (1769-1832). In part, I have chosen to read Cuvier as a well-known representative of a school of geological thought that later became known as "*catastrophisme*" (Palmer 9-10). However, Cuvier's specific contributions to geological history can also provide an influential narrative logic for understanding the temporal discourse of disaster far beyond geology. In my readings, I am not interested in Cuvier primarily for his scientific contributions; rather, I want to read his history as a type of narrative. Although I do not disregard entirely Cuvier's position in the history of science, I am more interested in how the structure of his narratives allows us to think about the temporality of disaster in the nineteenth century and beyond.

In the second half of this chapter, I trace how the dual temporality of a catastrophist narrative plays out in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*. I focus not on the specific geological details of Eliot's narrative, but rather on how the type of catastrophe narrative provided by Cuvier and his followers produces a particular ontology of everyday life—a certain way of being in the world. I suggest that Eliot's novel is preoccupied with the question of how to live in a catastrophist world. In examining disaster in this novel, I focus on its dual temporality and the affects that such a temporality produces, particularly the feeling of dread.

Cuvier: Geological Memory, History, and the Future

Although my concern in this section is be grounded primarily in what we would now recognize as geology, Cuvier and his contemporaries in the late eighteenth century had a very different understanding of the place of their project in the taxonomy of disciplines. As Thomas L. Hankins notes, in the eighteenth century, it is a broad discipline called "natural history" that would have included the lines of inquiry that seem most relevant to the understanding of disaster (11). Natural history, in this period, included disciplines such as geology and meteorology—as well as a good deal of what later came to be separated into disciplines such as zoology and botany (11). And while many of the inquiries that we now call geological would have been included under this heading of natural history, the word “geology” itself was not used in its contemporary sense until the late eighteenth century by Horace Bénédict de Saussure (Hankins 153). To complicate matters further, Cuvier and many of his contemporaries relied on a distinction between “geology” and “mineralogy”; geology

would have referred to a type of high-level theorizing, whereas mineralogy would have included observational fieldwork (Rudwick *Cuvier* 5).

Cuvier himself was not exactly what we would now call a geologist. While he spent a portion of his youth doing geological fieldwork (Rudwick *Cuvier* 3-4), his primary interest was in fossils. Indeed, Cuvier's main focus is what we now would call comparative anatomy, which was also the field in which he did his most innovative work. In *Les mots et les choses*, Michel Foucault credits Cuvier's focus on organic function instead of taxonomy to be the necessary development for the creation of a modern science of life (281). However, for Cuvier it became increasingly impossible to separate questions of anatomy from questions of the history of the earth. By focusing on fossils, Cuvier was forced to place his anatomical research within a greater context of life on earth. Cuvier's project was similar to the theoretical work performed by his predecessor Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon. However, unlike Buffon, Cuvier approached these questions not as a geotheorist—attempting to create and elegant and simple explanation for the current state of the earth from a set of simple laws—but as something more like a "geohistorian" (Rudwick *Bursting* 356).

As a geohistorian, Cuvier remained reluctant to make grand pronouncements. His own method was proudly observational and empirical, based on his increasing collection of fossil bones at the *Muséum national d'histoire naturelle* (Rudwick, *Bursting* 368). However, at the same time, he did not shy away from the broader implications of his work on the reconstruction of extinct animals—even in his early

lectures at the *Institut de France* (Rudwick *Cuvier* 17-18). His views of geohistory remained remarkably similar throughout his career, and he elaborated them in increasing detail in the two decades following his arrival in Paris after the Revolution (Rudwick *Cuvier* 17-18).

Cuvier's most accessible and well-elaborated account of geohistory was the "Discours préliminaire" published as part of the 1812 collection *Recherches sur les ossemens fossiles de quadrupèdes.* The "Discours préliminaire" was remarkably popular, so much so that it was republished in 1825 under the title *Discours sur les révolutions de la surface du globe*.[2] According to Outram, the *Discours* "went into six editions in French, was translated into all the major European languages, and was continually expanded, though not radically revised, by its author" (141). In the popularity of this work, Cuvier succeeded "in crossing the boundary […] between 'real science' and works of popularisation" (Outram 142).

The question that drives Cuvier's inquiry in the *Discours* is the question of fossils, specifically the question of how to account for fossil evidence of animals that no longer seem to exist in the world. Cuvier opens the *Discours* by stating that his purpose is to "*reconnaître à quels animaux appartiennent les débris osseux dont les couches superficielles du globe sont remplies*" (31; "recognize to which animals

[2] Cuvier's frequent revisions force the scholar to make choices about which edition to use. For my readings, I will rely primarily on the 1825 French version of the *Discours*, although I will at one point note a key difference between the 1825 version and the 1812 "Discours préliminaire."

belong the bone debris that fills the surface layers of the earth").[3] Cuvier continues by summarizing his work in *Ossemens fossiles* and describing his method: collecting and arranging fossil bones, reconstructing the creatures, and then comparing those creatures to animals that currently exist (31). The results of this process raise the question of how these "*monumens*" of a "*création ancienne*" fit into "*l'histoire de ce monde*" (31-33). The careful study of fossils must lead, inexorably, to a consideration of the history of the earth. Indeed, Cuvier—despite his self-understanding primarily as an anatomist—embraces such a move:

> *Nous admirons la force par laquelle l'esprit humain a mesuré les mouvemens de globes que la nature semblait avoir soustraits pour jamais à notre vue; le génie et la science ont franchi les limites de l'espace; quelques observations développées par le raisonnement ont dévoilé le mécanisme du monde. N'y aurait-il pas aussi quelque gloire pour l'homme à savoir franchir les limites du temps, et à retrouver, au moyen de quelques observations, l'histoire de ce monde et une succession d'événemens qui ont précédé la naissance du genre humain ?* (32-33)
>
> We admire the force of the human mind to measure the movement of planets that nature seemed to have held forever from our view. Genius and science

[3] All translations of Cuvier in this chapter are my own. While there exists a popular early nineteenth-century English translation, it is unreliable in many ways. As Rudwick notes, "the [English] translation that was commissioned by Robert Jameson […] is often misleading and in places downright bad" (*Cuvier* xi). Rudwick speculates that Jameson's translation fails because of Jameson's attempt to convince readers that "Cuvier had constructed his theories in order to support a literalistic interpretation of Genesis" (*Cuvier* xi).

> have overcome the limits of space. Some observations, developed by reason, have revealed the mechanism of the world. Would there not also be some glory for man to overcome the limits of time and to recover, with a few observations, the history of the earth and the succession of events which preceded the birth of humanity?

This passage is key to understanding the framework of Cuvier's project. First, he firmly and self-consciously claims for himself the epistemological standard of the Enlightenment (although, as I will note momentarily, his Enlightenment credentials are much more equivocal). Cuvier invokes "*le raisonnement,*" "*le génie,*" and "*la science*" as touchstones of his project. The reference to the discovery of "*les mouvemens de globes*" is an obvious allusion to Newton, who was "in France the greatest hero" of Enlightenment natural philosophers (Hankins 9). For Cuvier, as for his predecessors of the Enlightenment, the human mind ("*l'esprit humain*") has the capacity to understand nature. And what form does this understanding take? Cuvier uses twice in this passage the verb *franchir*. I have translated this verb as "to overcome," but it also can be translated as "to get over," "to cross," or "to go through."[4] For Cuvier, the human mind can overcome (*franchir*) the limits of both space and time. In the context of his own project in the *Discours*, Cuvier is asserting that it is possible to move beyond the time of a single lifespan or even of recorded history to begin to write a history of the earth ("*l'histoire de ce monde*")—a history that precedes human existence on the planet.

[4] Rudwick translates this verb, somewhat poetically, as "to burst."

However, by identifying his project here as a "history," Cuvier is making a commitment to a specific type of inquiry and potentially differentiating himself from his predecessors. Rudwick argues that the key difference between geotheorists such as Buffon and geohistorians such as Cuvier comes down to a difference in historical methods. Geotheorists wrote a specific type of history: the grand history. As Rudwick suggests, "the genres of philosophical and conjectural history constructed in the Enlightenment share with the genre of geotheory the goal of providing an overarching explanation of all the main relevant features: respectively of human nature and society, and of the physical earth" (*Bursting* 181). The history that supported geotheory was a history developed from first principles. In contrast, Rudwick argues that geohistory developed from an analogy to "antiquarian" history—a history "based on detailed concrete evidence" and that is "compiled bottom-up, not deduced top-down" (*Bursting* 193). This is an empirical history that attempts to build a larger story from smaller pieces, but which does not necessarily ever attempt to explain everything. And despite his bold claim to be following in the footsteps of Newton, Cuvier's project is indeed much more reliant on the localized, "antiquarian" history that Rudwick opposes to the projects of the Enlightenment. Indeed, it is not by accident that Cuvier—in the third sentence of the *Discours*—refers to himself as an "*antiquaire d'une espéce nouvelle*" (31; "antiquarian of a new type"). Analogous to the antiquarians who build their histories from texts, Cuvier—the new type—builds his history from fossils and rocks.

And what does Cuvier's history look like? For Cuvier, the key *événemens* in the history of the earth are "*révolutions et [...] catastrophes*" (35). Although the definitions of these words have since diverged, Cuvier uses them interchangeably throughout the *Discours* to mean a type of world-changing geological event. According to *Le Grand Robert de la langue française*, the word *révolution* was first used to refer to geological change in 1765 and, as Rudwick notes, it was standard usage in the science of Cuvier's day (*Cuvier* 262).[5] Even so, Rudwick suggests that "it is indeed possible that the idea of geologically recent catastrophe in the natural world became much more plausible in the light of his own apparently traumatic experience of the social catastrophe of the Terror" (*Cuvier* 262-63).

But while the word *révolution* could be applied in Cuvier's period to any significant geological alteration, and while he recognized that many large-scale geological changes could have been gradual or slow, he also insisted that "*la plupart des catastrophes [...] ont été subites*" (41; "most catastrophes [...] were sudden"). In support of this, he cites geological evidence in rock strata of large-scale floods, as well as (perhaps more convincingly) the existence of "*cadavres de grands quadrupèdes que la glace a saisis*" (42; "corpses of large quadrupeds that the ice has seized"). From these corpses, Cuvier creates a narrative of sudden, recurring catastrophe:

[5] The *Oxford English Dictionary* credits the first use of the word in this sense to Buffon in 1749. Whichever date is correct, it is clear that the usage was established well before Cuvier.

> *La vie a donc souvent été troublée sur cette terre par des événemens effroyables. Des êtres vivans sans nombre ont été victimes de ces catastrophes*; *les uns habitans de la terre sèche se sont vus engloutis par des déluges; les autres, qui peuplaient le sein des eaux, ont été mis à sec avec le fond des mers subitement relevé.* (42)
>
> Life has therefore been troubled on this earth by terrible events. Living beings without number have been victims of these catastrophes: some inhabitants of dry land were engulfed by floods; others, who lived in the water, were brought to the surface as the bottom of the sea was raised.

For Cuvier, the story of life on earth is a story of the repeated destruction of life by abrupt natural events. This is the central element of Cuvier's narrative logic of catastrophe, a logic to which I will return in more detail. But beyond this idea, Cuvier's rhetoric communicates a type of imaginative sympathy; he does not only state the facts of extinction, but rather takes a moment to imagine the different ways it could have occurred for different forms of life. He pictures how catastrophes took organisms by surprise (the large quadrupeds as they were seized by the ice, the mollusks as they are thrust out of the sea into dry air). Cuvier's narrative is thus not merely geological, but also remains concerned with the ways that geological catastrophe is experienced by living beings.

It is this quality of Cuvier's imaginative sympathy that Balzac praises in *La peau de chagrin* (1831). In an aside that also attests to Cuvier's popularity in the early

nineteenth century, Balzac's narrator muses on Cuvier's ability to call up the lost worlds of geohistory:

> *Cuvier n'est-il pas le plus grand poëte de notre siècle? Lord Byron a bien reproduit par des mots quelques agitations morales; mais notre immortel naturaliste a reconstruit des mondes avec des os blanchis* [...]. *Il réveille le néant sans prononcer des paroles artificiellement magiques; il fouille une parcelle de gypse, y aperçoit une empreinte, et vous crie: —Voyez! Soudain les marbres s'animalisent, la mort se vivifie, le monde se déroule!* (60-61).
>
> Is not Cuvier the greatest poet of our century? Lord Byron has well reproduced in words some moral conflicts, but our immortal naturalist has reconstructed worlds from bleached bones. [...] He wakes nothingness without pronouncing artificial magic words. He searches a piece of gypsum, perceives an imprint, and cries to you, "Look!" Suddenly marble becomes animal, the dead live, and the world unfurls! (my translation)

Cuvier is a *poëte* for the narrator in *La peau de chagrin* because he engages in *poiesis* in the full sense of the Greek word. He creates (or reconstructs) worlds with words. Though not only with words, for Cuvier's magic relies on traces of the mineral world: bleached bones, a chunk of gypsum. He does not create from nothingness, but rather conjures the organic from the inorganic, resurrecting a dead world to life.

Cuvier's imaginative sympathy here is part of a broader project of what I call geological memory. As Terdiman notes, "memory is the modality of our relation to the past" (*Present* 7). It is how we experience the temporality of the past within the

temporality of the present. As such, it is "the faculty that sustains continuity in collective and in individual experience" (Terdiman *Present* 8). It links us to our own history and to the histories of collectives. But can one speak of a memory that precedes individuals or collectivities? Memories, say, of mammoths and mollusks, encroaching ice and rising waters? The phrase "geological memory" may seem to approach incoherence, at least from an anthropocentric position: the vast scale of time over which geology unfolds and the eons that preceded the appearance of humans would seem to preclude memory as a modality for experiencing these regions of the past.

Terdiman recognizes a solution to this dilemma, a solution that also captures Cuvier's approach to geological history. In his discussion of Freud and individual recollection, Terdiman notes that memories are often inaccessible or missing, that memory itself can fail. In such a moment, then, we must rely not on memory but on interpretation. As he argues, "*we need hermeneutics when memory fails*: when the transparency of our access to the meanings transmitted to us from the past is troubled or interrupted" (*Present* 297; emphasis in original). The response to the absence of memory is to "trad[e] mnemonics for hermeneutics," to substitute interpretation for memory (*Present* 296). This is an essential part of Cuvier's project. By an interpretation of geological features, he is attempting to create a type of geological memory—an experience of the earth before humans that humans can nevertheless adopt as part of the past, a past that can inhabit the present.

Cuvier describes his hermeneutic method in the *Discours*. After his imaginative visions of extinctions, Cuvier pauses to explain how it is possible for the natural historian—bound to his own time—to reconstruct the record of catastrophe and extinction. For Cuvier, the process of reconstruction depends on vision: "*Ces grands et terribles événemens sont clairement empreints partout pour l'œil qui sait en lire l'histoire dans leurs monumens*" (43; "These grand and terrible events are clearly marked everywhere for the eye which knows how to read the history in their monuments"). Indeed, as we have seen in Balzac, Cuvier exhorts one to "*Voyez*!"—to look. And yet, the method here is not as simple as perception, but instead requires a type of reading ("*lire*"). For Cuvier, fossils can be read—as can landscape itself. He speaks of the "*fameuses montagnes primitives ou primordiales qui traversent nos continens,"* noting that one can read *"des signes de la manière violente dont elles ont été élevées*" (44; "famous primitive or primordial mountains that traverse our continents"; "the signs of the violent way in which they were raised"). Catastrophes leave traces on the earth as "*signes,*" which can then be read by the attentive natural historian. Cuvier is outlining a hermeneutics of catastrophe.

The result of Cuvier's interpretation of geological signs is a narrative. In producing this type of narrative, he is following—somewhat uneasily—an example of the geotheorists who preceded him, such as Buffon. Buffon's narrative of the history of the earth is worth considering here as it offers both a template for Cuvier's story and something of an authoritative tradition against which Cuvier could subsequently react.

In 1778's *Des époques de la Nature*, Buffon offers a narrative in which the earth was created as the result of a comet's collision with the sun (*Oeuvres* 1218-21). The resulting material that was flung into space resolved itself into the planets of the solar system and immediately began to cool. It is the cooling of the earth, in this narrative, that produces all geological action, creating the geological features that are currently extant, as well as forms of life. Buffon's theory here is based, to a large degree, on the laws of thermodynamics. In support of this narrative, Buffon conducted experiments on the cooling of heated iron spheres, assuming that the rate of cooling of such spheres would be analogous to the rate of cooling of the earth. In a chapter in the *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière* entitled "*Recherches sur le refroidissement de la terre et des planètes*," he offers estimates based on his experiments for the age of the earth (74832 years) and the number of years that remained until the cooling earth would become uninhabitable (93291 years) (*Histoire naturelle* 506).

It is worth noting, at this point, that Buffon's history was profoundly a-theological. Buffon's estimate of the age of the earth is significantly greater than the age calculated by scholars of Genesis in that period. As Hankins notes, "for Buffon, natural history was entirely natural. His history of the earth simply ignored Genesis and biblical chronology" (151). His account of the comet and its collision with the sun is profoundly at odds with the Bible. And his account of the end of the world—a slow, cold flickering out—also owes nothing to biblical accounts.

But the secularity of Buffon's narrative did not merely extend to his revision of the biblical timescale and his pointed disregard for the biblical creation narrative. As Jacques Roger suggests, Buffon's opposition to a Christianized geotheory forced him to remove all catastrophes from the system. According to Roger, "*Buffon a soigneusement exclu les catastrophes de sa théorie de la Terre, et s'est moqué de ceux qui les utilisaient au gré de leur fantaisie. D'abord parce que ces catastrophes sont des interventions directes de Dieu dans l'histoire de la Nature, et que Buffon exclut Dieu de cette histoire*" (163-64; "Buffon carefully excluded catastrophes from his Theory of the Earth and mocked those who used them to suit their fancy. First, because catastrophes were direct interventions of God into the history of Nature and Buffon excluded God from this history"; my translation). And yet, if catastrophes are the direct evidence of God, how did Buffon account for the collision of the comet that produced the earth in the first place? To deal with this difficulty, Roger notes, Buffon made a move from God to chance:

> *Buffon esquive la difficulté en montrant que cette recontre a été un accident fortuit*, *mais en même temps trés probable. Accident fortuit, elle échappe au déterminisme général des phénomènes naturels. Elle aurait pu ne pas se produire, et le fait qu'elle se soit produite n'implique nullement qu'elle se reproduira.* [...] *Le hasard seul peut créer l'événement unique et irréversible, après lequel rien ne sera plus comme avant*. (164)
>
> Buffon dodged the difficulty by showing that this encounter [between the sun and the comet] was a fortuitous accident, but at the same time, very probable.

> A fortuitous accident, it escaped the general determinism of natural phenomena. It might not have happened, and the fact that it happened does not mean that it will happen again. [...] Only chance can create the unique and irreversible event, after which nothing will be as before. (my translation)

Buffon's solution here is remarkable, both in a scientific and a narrative sense. He essentially allows for a "one time only" accident that produces the earth, after which the usual laws of natural phenomena become active again. It is only in this one chance moment that Buffon is willing to suspend the probabilities that govern life on earth so predictably. For Buffon, one unlikely accident sets the entire narrative in motion; everything after that just follows the laws of thermodynamics.

However, this is not to say that the earth has remained (and will remain) the same. For Buffon, the earth has changed and will continue to do so in the future (as it continues its *refroidissement*). Although he does not recognize the same geological violence that Cuvier does (to which I will return), Buffon cannot deny that the earth carries a record of catastrophe—catastrophes that are, for him, entirely natural and that do not signal any divine intervention. However, in *Époques* Buffon suggests that the geological violence that accompanied the cooling process in the early years of the earth has, by his time, significantly subsided, replaced instead with a type of peace that has allowed for the flourishing of Western civilization. Buffon claims that,

> *Ces hommes, profondément affectés des calamités de leur premier état, et ayant encore sous leurs yeux les ravages des inondations, les incendies des volcans, les gouffres ouverts par les secousses de la Terre, ont conservé un*

souvenir durable et presque éternel des ces malheurs du monde: l'idée qu'il doit périr par un déluge universel ou par un embrasement général; [...] à peine est-il encore aujourd'hui rassuré par l'expérience des temps, par le calme qui a succédé à ces siècles d'orages, enfin par la connaissance des effets et des opérations de la Nature; connaissance qui n'a pu s'acquérir qu'après l'établissement de quelque grande société dans des terres paisibles. (*Oeuvres* 1327)

These men, profoundly affected by calamities of their former state and still having before their eyes the ravages of floods, the fires of volcanoes, the chasms opened by the shaking of the Earth, have retained a lasting and almost eternal memory of the misfortunes of the world—the idea that he must perish by a universal deluge or a general conflagration. [...] Scarcely is he reassured still today by the experience of time, by the calm which has succeeded these centuries of storms. And finally by the knowledge of the effects and operations of Nature, knowledge which could only be acquired after the establishment of a grand society in a peaceful land. (my translation)

This passage illuminates several of the key aspects of Buffon's geological and historical narrative. First, it offers a way of explaining what Buffon recognizes as a human preoccupation with grand catastrophes. For Buffon, the ideas of a "universal deluge" or "grand conflagration" are merely exaggerations—made in fear—of very real, but much smaller in scale, calamities. He offers a theory of human response to catastrophe that relates psychology to mythology. The early *calamités* that were

associated with the cooling of the earth leave traces on human consciousness that, in turn, become fears that acquire the status of myths. However, Buffon is also arguing here that there now exists on earth a space in which humans can live without these fears. Humans can be reassured by a new knowledge of nature—a knowledge that is gained only through the establishment of a great society in a peaceful land. However, it is not merely knowledge of Nature that allows humans to live in peace; rather, there is also the assertion here that Buffon and his contemporaries live in the calm that succeeds the centuries of storms. This is the narrative logic of Buffon: as the earth cools, calamity gives way to calm. And finally, in the end, to complete frozen stasis, as he recounts in his *Histoire naturelle des minéraux*: "*l'envahissement du globe entier par les glaces, et la mort de la Nature par le froid*" (*Oeuvres* 1365; "the invasion of the entire earth by ice and the death of Nature from cold"; my translation).

There is something poetic about the slow invasion of ice that Buffon envisions as the end of life on earth. And according to Rudwick, Buffon's contemporaries read his narrative in that spirit. His geotheory was "most widely faulted—not least by other naturalists—as a mere romance or 'novel' [*roman*]" (*Bursting* 149; bracketed phrase in the original). Indeed, we can see an objection to Buffon's geotheory being made on narrative grounds by John Playfair. As a disciple of James Hutton, Playfair takes issue with Buffon's narrative in his *Illustrations of the Huttonian Theory of the Earth* (1802):

> Buffon represents the cooling of our planet, and its loss of heat, as a process continually advancing, and which has no limit, but the final extinction of life

> and motion over all the surface, and through all the interior, of the earth. The death of nature herself is the distant but gloomy object that terminates our view, and reminds us of the wild fictions of the Scandinavian mythology, according to which, *annihilation* is at last to extend its empire even to the gods. This dismal and unphilosophic vision […] forms a complete contrast to the theory of Dr Hutton, where nothing is to be seen beyond the continuation of the present order; where no latent seed of evil threatens final destruction of the whole; and where the movements are so perfect, that they can never terminate of themselves. This is surely a view of the world more suited to the dignity of NATURE, and the wisdom of its AUTHOR, than has yet been offered by any other system of cosmology. (485-86)

In opposition to Buffon's narrative of slow decline and eventual "annihilation," Playfair and Hutton propose a different model: homeostasis. In this model, "the present order" will always continue, just as it is now. The future will be no different from today.

But there is more to Playfair's critique of Buffon that is noteworthy here, and not only for his appeal to a type of deism (the "AUTHOR" of nature who set in motion the movements). Rather, Playfair's objection is both aesthetic and affective; in other words, it is an objection not on scientific grounds, but on narrative grounds. The complete annihilation that Buffon predicts is just not suitable as a narrative. It is "wild" and "Scandinavian." It offends the "dignity of NATURE." It's not a good story; indeed, perhaps it is too much of a story—it is more "mythology" than

philosophy. At the same time, Buffon's story is to be faulted for its affective valence. It is "gloomy" and "dismal." Beyond the question of Buffon's science (which Hutton and Playfair do attempt to critique elsewhere), this passage reveals how geotheory also serves as a type of literary narrative that can be used to understand the world and that can be found suitable or unsuitable on aesthetic or affective grounds.

Such a critique of Buffon's narrative invites us to read all such narratives *as* narratives and to understand how they function as such. We can do so by relying on a methodology for reading historiography suggested by Hayden White. White argues that it is possible to read a historical work purely as a narrative: "I will consider the historical work to be what it most manifestly is—that is to say, a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse" (2-3). Treating historical accounts as the narratives that they "manifestly" are, White is able to read them within the purview of literary studies. Indeed, as White notes, his method is "formalist. I will not try to decide whether a given historian's work is a better, or more correct, account of a specific set of events of segment of the historical process than some other historian's account of them; rather, I will seek to identify the structural components of those accounts" (3-4). This is a way of reading history that is less concerned with the content of that history and its relation to some version of reality; rather, this method is focused on the type of story that is being told and how it is told. I bring this formalist impulse to my reading of Cuvier's narrative in this chapter.

I have suggested that Cuvier's narrative history develops in the tradition of—and in response to—the geotheoretorical narratives of Buffon and others. Although

some modern theorists group Cuvier with other eighteenth and nineteenth-century catastrophists who proffered a type of biblical geology, I would argue that Cuvier carries forward from Buffon a version of his predecessor's a-theological impulse. Despite occasional moments in the *Discours* in which he seems to speak in an explicitly religious vocabulary, Cuvier is no proponent of biblical geology. Indeed, he frequently goes out of his way to mock its practitioners and their "*anciens systèmes*" (61; "outdated systems"). Cuvier, like Buffon before him, refuses to tailor his narrative to the limitations of a biblical worldview. As he notes, "*pendant long-temps on n'admit que deux événemens, que deux époques de mutations sur la globe: la création et le déluge*" (61; "For a long time, only two events, only two epochs of mutations of the globe, have been admitted: the creation and the deluge"). Cuvier's language here implies the strong limitation that such a view has placed on geological theory; other possibilities cannot be admitted.

However, Cuvier's apparent desire for something approaching a materialist narrative of the earth's history runs up against his empirical modesty. His commitment to the collection and interpretation of fossils leads him to criticize many of his contemporaries and predecessors (including, presumably, Buffon) as "*naturalistes de cabinet*" (69; "stay-at-home naturalists"), i.e., as theorists who create systems without geological observation and without the studies in comparative anatomy that allow Cuvier himself to read the fossil record. Such a refusal to speculate beyond the geological evidence means that Cuvier remains silent on the question that seems to have most clearly excited Buffon: the question of the creation

of the earth. There is no wayward comet in Cuvier's narrative; nor, as we have seen, is he willing to default to the biblical narrative of the creation.

Cuvier's empirical modesty is not limited, however, solely to the question of origins. As I have already described, Cuvier's narrative of geological history is a story of sudden catastrophes, of "*événemens*" and "*révolutions*." However, Cuvier remains reticent even about the causes of such events. Despite his confidence in his ability to read the signs of fossils, and despite his desire for the "*gloire*" that attends on the revelation the history of the earth, Cuvier is stymied by the question of causality. He surveys and finds causally insufficient all of the current known sources of geological action: "*les pluies et les dégels* [...]; *les eaux courantes* [...]; *la mer* [...]; *enfin les volcans*" (49; "the rains and thaws; running water; the sea; and finally volcanoes"). Similarly, Cuvier doubts the possibility that "*causes astronomiques constantes*" could account for sudden violent change (59; "constant [predictable] astronomical causes"). The question of causality remains unreadable from the geological record and Cuvier refuses to speculate.

Cuvier's explanation of the causation of grand geological catastrophe is purely a negative one: there is no possible explanation. It is at this point that Cuvier makes a move that complicates his attempt to produce a narrative of the world (and that opens him up to modern accusations of being a crypto-biblical geologist). He suggests that searching for existing causes will be in vain because "*le fil des opérations est rompu; la marche de la nature est changée; et aucun des agens qu'elle emploie aujourd'hui ne lui aurait suffi pour produire ses anciens ouvrages*" (49; "the thread of

[geological] operations is broken; the march of nature is changed; and none of the agents that it employs today would have been sufficient to produce its ancient works"). Cuvier's solution then to the lack of obvious contemporary physical causes for geological catastrophe is to argue that nature itself has changed since those catastrophes. The thread of continuity between the ancient natural world and the contemporary natural world has been broken.

What does such an admission mean for Cuvier's narrative? One consequence is that it produces an uncertainty about the type of rules that we can ascribe to the behavior of the natural world. Buffon suspended the rules once: to allow for a truly spectacular event—one that, he insists, will never happen again. Cuvier, on the other hand, must allow for the possibility that some of the rules of nature as we understand them are fluid or potentially suspendable and that they have changed or have been suspended on more than one occasion in the past. The predictability of Buffon's world from physical laws is perfect—from the moment after the comet's collision. But the predictability of Cuvier's world seems, by contrast to be a more open question. I will return to this version of the world later in this chapter when I discuss Cuvier's vision of the future.

Cuvier's admitted uncertainty about causality here helps us more clearly to understand what kind of project his narrative is. Buffon is offering a causal history of the earth, from a perspective of an observer outside of time and not tethered entirely to this earth. Buffon can see the comet collision that inaugurated the history of the earth, just as he can see the icy end of that planet in the distant future. Cuvier's

history, by contrast is neither a causal history nor a history *sub specie aeternitatis.* Rather, it is a human history, a history that takes its perspective from that of a human living on earth in the early nineteenth century. Cuvier's narrative is not about causation or laws of nature, nor even about the origin and eventual end of the earth. Instead, it is rooted in memory and experience. This includes the type of experience that I have in this chapter called geological memory, a memory that is recreated hermeneutically by a human observer, a conjuring up of an experience that predates human experience but which that can, through imaginative sympathy, become part of a collective history.

This is where the full ambition of Cuvier's project becomes apparent. His history is attempting to create a narrative that combines and unifies multiple disparate histories, histories that vary considerably in scale—both in space and in time. Or, to put it another way, Cuvier is producing a synthesis of several different temporalities: human history, mythical experience, and geological memory. All three of these types of history/memory are orientations toward a past, however, they inhabit different spaces within that past. Cuvier's ambition is to find a way to place all three temporal threads, all three versions of history, onto one timeline—a timeline that is, as is required by the empirical evidence, punctuated by catastrophe.

Cuvier's first move in this unification of multiples histories into a type of human history is to historicize humankind itself. He notes bluntly that "*il n'y a point d'os humains fossiles*" (121; "there are no fossil human bones"). And, after

considering several different potential explanations for this lack, he is forced to conclude that

> *Quoi qu'il en soit, l'établissement de l'homme dans les pays où nous avons dit que se trouvent les fossiles d'animaux terrestres, c'est-à-dire dans la plus grande partie de l'Europe, de l'Asie et de l'Amérique, est nécessairement postérieur non-seulement aux révolutions qui ont enfoui ces os, mais encore à celles qui ont remis à découvert les couches qui les enveloppent, et qui sont les dernières que le globe ait subies.* (126)
>
> However it may be, the establishment of man in the countries where we have said that the fossils of terrestrial animals are found, that is in the greatest part of Europe, Asia, and America, is necessarily posterior not only to the revolutions which have buried those bones, but also to those which have uncovered the strata which surround them and which are the last [catastrophes] that the globe has suffered.

The first thing to note here is Cuvier's caution. He does not rule out the existence of humans during the previous catastrophes; he only suggests that they could not have been living in Europe, Asia, or the Americas. Although Cuvier does not include Africa on this list, it is clear that North Africa is included implicitly in this statement. Only a page earlier, Cuvier notes that he is familiar with "*les momies humaines*" of Egypt (125; "human mummies"). And Cuvier would have known well the fieldwork in natural history conducted by his occasional friend and intellectual competitor Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire as part of Napoleon's expedition to Egypt. With his

geographical list, then, Cuvier makes clear the reach of natural history fieldwork in his period. However, it is possible to elaborate on the elision of most of Africa from Cuvier's purview here; indeed, the exclusion of certain parts of the globe are required by the very nature of Cuvier's project.

As I have suggested, the attempt to place human history in relation to natural or geological history is an attempt unify two different *kinds* of history. And it catastrophe that allows him to do so. His argument rests here on the fact that, he notes, "*l'on voit clairement que cette dernière révolution, et par conséquent l'établissement de nos sociétés actuelles ne peuvent pas être très-anciens*" (126-27; "it is clear that the last revolution, and consequently the establishment of our present society, cannot be very ancient"). This last catastratophe ("*cette dernière révolution*") then provides a hinge between the history of the earth and the history of our society. Or, as Cuvier puts it, the catastrophe "*lie d'une chaîne non interrompue l'histoire naturelle et l'histoire civile*" (127; "binds in an unbroken chain natural history and civil history"). This then is Cuvier's grand ambition for his history of catastrophe: to link the history of the natural world to human history. And this explains why his project can only account for Europe, Asia, America, and Egypt—the rest of the world, for Cuvier and his contemporaries, *had no civil history*. As G. W. F. Hegel famously declared in the 1830-31 lectures that became his *Philosophy of History*, Africa "is no historical part of the world. [...] What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature" (99).

But what does it mean for Cuvier's "*histoire naturelle*" to be linked to "*l'histoire civile*"? For one thing, it means the possibility of placing geological events such as catastrophes on the same scale that is used to measure human time. It means the ability to locate geological events in relation to human events in the same historical time, without positing a necessary relationship between the two (as scholars of biblical time such as James Ussher did).[6] But beyond a purely geological history, Cuvier also offers here a history of life. As Foucault argues, Cuvier's catastrophist history of periodic extinctions changed the way that natural historians viewed life itself:

> *La discontinuité des formes vivantes a permis de concevoir une grande dérive temporelle, que n'autorisait pas, malgré des analogies de surface, la continuité des structures et des caractères. On a pu substituter une «histoire» de la nature à l'histoire naturelle, gráce au fractionnement de cette nappe où tous les êtres naturels venaient en ordre trouver leur place.* (*Les mots* 288)
>
> The discontinuity of living forms made it possible to conceive a great temporal current for which the continuity of structures and characters, despite the superficial analogies, could not provide a basis. With spatial discontinuity, the breaking up of the great table, and the fragmentation of the surface upon which all natural beings had taken their ordered places, it became possible to replace natural history with a "history" of nature. (*Order* 275)

[6] This type of timeline is not unique to Cuvier, of course. Buffon's calculations of the age of the earth would offer a similar historical timeline, although he did not provide specific dates on his timeline for the emergence of human culture.

Foucault's "*grande dérive temporelle*" here is the entry of a type of contingency into the history of life, the idea that there is no necessity of continuity between living beings (in structure or in character). Foucault places such drifting discontinuity in opposition to the order of life presupposed by Classical thought, an order that can be expressed spatially as a table or expanse in which all living beings can be ordered. In contrast to this visual representation of order, Foucault reads Cuvier as proposing an essentially temporal dimension of life that is entirely contingent on "*éléments extérieurs, de conditions d'existence*" (288; "exterior elements, on conditions of existence"; my translation). Once life becomes entirely dependent on the conditions of existence at any given moment (geology, climate, etc.) it can only be understood in relation to those conditions. Just as Cuvier's mammoth is seized by the ice and his mollusks are cast onto dry land, living beings more generally are situated in particular historical moments that determine what becomes of them—at both the individual and collective level. According to Foucault, with Cuvier, "*l'historicité s'est donc introduite maintenant dans la nature—ou plutôt dans le vivant*" (288; "historicity is now introduced into nature—or rather, into the living"; my translation). Living beings now exist in their own particular history.

So far, I have outlined Cuvier's attempt to create a timeline on which he can bring together civil history with geological history and the history of life. However, in practice, Cuvier's focus on civil history becomes overwhelmed by another type of history: mythical history. Cuvier's attitude toward mythological source is complicated and, at times, contradictory. He has clearly read broadly and is enthralled by ancient

history. He draws on sources from Europe, the Middle East, Egypt, India, and China, as well as the Americas. He does not do so uncritically, however. He is cautious not to appear too credulous of mythological sources. At one point, he notes that "*au lieu de porter comme Évhémère ou comme Bannier la mythologie dans l'histoire, je suis d'avis qu'il faudrait reporter une grande partie de l'histoire dans la mythologie*" (174; instead of, like Euhemerus or Bannier, taking mythology as history, I believe that we should refer to a large part of history as mythology").

Yet, Cuvier cannot escape the possibility that some portion of mythology is actually history. His method here is comparative. He traces catastrophe myths from a range of cultures in an attempt to come to identify a universal catastrophe. He begins with Genesis, "*l'écrit le plus ancien dont notre occident soit en possession*" (146; "the most ancient writing that our West has in its possession"). Comparing Genesis to subsequent texts from multiple cultures, Cuvier notes that "*cet ouvrage, et tous ceux qui ont été faits depuis, quelque étrangers que leurs auteurs fussent et à Moïse et à son peuple,* [...] *ils nous parlent tous d'une catastrophe générale, d'une irruption des eaux, qui occasiona une régénération presque totale du genre humain* (146-47; "this book, and all those that have been made since, however unknown Moses and his people were to their authors, they have all spoken of a general catastrophe, an irruption of the waters which occasioned an almost total regeneration of the human race"). Despite his skepticism of mythology as history, for Cuvier the convergence of multiple cultural mythologies on one universal deluge, considering the fact that many of these cultures would not have known the story of Genesis, is evidence for some

historical basis for the most recent catastrophe. Even the Americans, Cuvier argues, show evidence in their "*grossiers hiéroglyphes*" ("gross hieroglyphics") that "ils ont leur Noé, ou leur Deucalion, comme les Indiens, comme les Babyloniens, comme les Grecs" (180; "they have their Noah or their Deucalion, like the Indians, the Babylonians, and the Greeks"). The deluge, Cuvier insists, was indeed universal.

Cuvier is not satisfied to establish the historical existence of the universal catastrophe that appears in mythologies across cultures; he must also place that catastrophe into the historical timeline. Cuvier's is not only concerned with the authenticity of mythological catastrophe, but in "*dates authentiques*" for that catastrophe (177; "authentic dates"). To this end, he reasons through a remarkably complex estimate of the age of Egyptian civilization (180-87), followed by a similarly complicated explanation of how astronomy reveals Chinese culture to be younger than imagined (192-93). Finally, Cuvier cites evidence from European mines that argues for a relatively recent catastrophe (224). The sum of this all of this evidence leads Cuvier (if not the reader) to decide

> *que la surface de notre globe a été victime d'une grande et subite révolution, dont la date ne peut remonter beaucoup au-delà de cinq ou six mille ans*; [...] *c'est depuis cette révolution que le petit nombre des individus épargnés par elle se sont répandus et propagés sur les terrains nouvellement mis à sec, et par consequent que c'est depuis cette époque seulement que nos sociétés ont repris une marche progressive, qu'elles ont formé des établissemens, élevé des*

monumens, recueilli des faits naturels, et combiné des systèmes scientifiques. (225)

> that the surface of our globe was a victim of a large and sudden revolution, whose date cannot go much beyond five or six thousand years ago. [...] It was after this revolution that the small number of individuals spared by it have spread and propagated over the newly-dry lands, and therefore it was only after this epoch that our societies have resumed a progressive march, that they have formed settlements, raised monuments, collected facts of nature, and invented scientific systems.

This is a remarkable passage in that it reveals the full breadth of Cuvier's project. In this moment, Cuvier has converted myth into history. But even more, he has brought geology (the revolution), the history of life (the individuals who perished and those who were spared), and the beginning of civilization (the settlements, the monuments, the scientific inquiries) into coexistence in one single timeline.

This collation of histories, of different temporalities that make up a broad experience of the past, changes our relation to catastrophe. Cuvier's narrative brings catastrophe—both geological and mythical—into human history. And not any catastrophe, but rather catastrophe on a massive, world-altering scale. Cuvier's geological catastrophes are not the exaggerations of smaller events that appear haunt human history in Buffon. In Cuvier's ambitions, catastrophe is meant to occupy a temporality that can be directly linked to the present as a direct intervention in our own historical experience. And although Cuvier's account of civil history may seem

to us to be barely removed from a version of mythological history, his intentions are clear. For Cuvier, catastrophe is meant to be, through the hermeneutics of geological memory and comparative mythology, reconstituted as part of historical memory.

But what is the relationship between this newly recovered geohistorical past and the present? As I noted earlier, Cuvier argues that the most recent catastrophe is only the latest in a series of at least two or three. And where does that leave us at the present time? Cuvier ends the *Discours* with a description of the geological present:

> *Ce qui est certain, c'est que nous sommes maintenant au moins au milieu d'une quatrième succession d'animaux terrestres, et qu'après l'âge des reptiles, après celui des palæotheriums, après celui des mammouths, des mastodontes et des megatheriums, est venu l'âge où l'espèce humaine, aidée de quelques animaux domestiques, domine et féconde paisiblement la terre* [...]. (273)
>
> What is certain is that we are now at least in the middle of a fourth succession of terrestrial animals, and that after the age of reptiles, after that of palæotheriums, after that of mammoths, mastodons, and megatheriums, has come the age in which the human species, aided by some domestic animals, peacefully dominates and fertilizes the earth.

This passage is more complex than it appears. In one sense, it seems like the peaceful resolution to a violent tale of geological catastrophe, another version of Buffon's story of the present. The prevailing affect in this passage is calm. After Cuvier's earlier depictions of the sudden deaths of mammoths and mollusks, we now end with an

evocation of a farmer living in harmony with the fertile earth. The monsters of the previous ages, the reptiles and the giant sloths, have disappeared; indeed, in this fourth age, the only animals worth mentioning are our pets. Cuvier's narrative of past catastrophe has reached its happy ending.

But there is a hint of unease in this peaceful resolution. The problem here is one that is required by Cuvier's narrative logic: if massive geological catastrophe is unpredictable and has already happened two or three times, why should we believe that the age of catastrophe has passed? In other words, why should we not expect a fourth catastrophe? Perhaps it could be said that Cuvier tries to foreclose this possibility by his suggestion that, in terms of geological forces capable of causing large-scale catastrophe, the thread ("*le fil*") between the distant past and the modern world is broken. However, this explanation remains unsatisfactory. For one thing, if the causes of the previous catastrophes are unknown (and, indeed, unknowable), then it is impossible to be certain that such causes will not become active again. Even if it is possible for Cuvier to know that the operations of the earth have changed, there is no way to be certain that they will not change back. Cuvier's uncertainty about the causes of previous catastrophes does not allow him to rule out future ones.

Furthermore, it is far from clear that Cuvier himself believes that the age of catastrophes has passed. Even in his final evocation of the peaceful fourth age, I read a tremor of anxiety. What does it mean for Cuvier to say that we are "*au moins au milieu*" ("at least in the middle") of the fourth age? Even beyond the uncertainty introduced by the phrase "*au moins,*" there is the implication of temporality in the "*au*

milieu." Although phrase can have either spatial or temporal connotations, the temporal aspect of it is obvious here, modifying as it does the word "*succession*"—a word that implies a temporal sequence. The phrase "*au milieu*" serves as a signpost of temporality. Being "in the midst" or "in the middle" of an age (or "*succession*") implies a boundedness. It requires that there is an end to that age. Even at the moment of apparent resolution, Cuvier betrays an anxiety about the possibility of future catastrophe. At this moment, Cuvier ironizes his own depiction of the peaceful fourth age.

Nor is this the only place that Cuvier seems to call into question the future of human existence. The original version of the "*Discours préliminaire,*" published in 1812 as part of the collection *Les ossemens fossiles de quadrupèdes*, also contains such a hint of human impermanence. The end of the "*Discours préliminaire*" is significantly different from that in the later, revised *Discours*; there is no evocation of a peaceful fourth age at the work's conclusion. Instead, Cuvier ends the "*Discours*" with a call for improved geological research. The result of using better methods, Cuvier suggests, would mean that "*l'homme, à qui il n'a été accordé qu'un instant sur la terre, auroit la gloire de refaire l'histoire des milliers de siècles qui ont précédé son existence*" (*Les ossemens* 116; "man, to whom has been granted only an instant on earth, would have the glory to recreate the history of thousands of centuries which preceded his existence"). I want to focus on the word "*instant*" here, in that it (much as "*au milieu*" did before) suggests a temporal limitation on human existence. Obviously, the time of humans on earth is an instant, as it occurs only after

"thousands of centuries"; however, the word instant also seems to suggest a boundedness not only in comparison to the past, but also in comparison of the future. If humans were to exist eternally from the moment of their creation, it does not make sense to describe their time on earth as an instant. Indeed, it should come as little surprise that, considering the model of geological change that Cuvier has proposed, future catastrophes cannot be ruled out.

It is in an earlier paper, however, that Cuvier most explicitly raises the possibility of future catastrophe. In his first lecture at the *Institut* in 1796, Cuvier presented the results of his comparative research on the fossil bones of elephants, arguing that the modern elephant is an entirely different species from the fossil elephants (or mammoths) that had been found. As Rudwick notes, this finding allowed Cuvier to set out the argument that we are now familiar with—the argument that an earlier world had been destroyed by some sort of catastrophe (*Cuvier* 17-18). A version of his paper was published three years later. In this paper, Cuvier added a phrase that had not appeared in his original lecture (Rudwick *Cuvier* 24 n.18). Speaking of the ancient mammoths, Cuvier notes that "*il est probable qu'elles ont appartenu à des êtres d'un monde antérieur au nôtre, à des êtres détruits par quelques révolutions de ce globe; êtres dont ceux qui existent aujourd'hui ont rempli la place, pour se voir peut-être un jour également détruits et remplacés par d'autres.* ("*Les espèces*" 21; "it is probable that they belonged to beings of a world before ours, to beings destroyed by some revolution of the globe. Beings such as those that exist today have taken their place, to see themselves perhaps one day destroyed and

replaced by others"). It is in this version of Cuvier's catastrophism that we see most fully its implication for the future. Cuvier raises the possibility that catastrophe may occur again. The beings that now exist replaced those that existed before and may be destroyed and replaced themselves in the future. And while Cuvier never stated this possibility as clearly in his future work, I have already suggested that it remains implicit in his rhetoric in both versions of the *Discours*. Indeed, the unspoken possibility of future catastrophe persists throughout his subsequent work.

This, then, is the temporal space in which Cuvier has placed humans. They are conscious of the direct intervention of catastrophes in past history—catastrophes that have wiped out entire species and that have remade the surface of the earth. Catastrophe is part of the past, but in such a way that it can potentially be imagined as part of the same historical narrative that includes everyday life. Catastrophe is a memory, then, that belongs to the historical present. However, at the same time, the future may well hold similar catastrophe. The present, despite its peacefulness, is hardly free from the possibility of destruction.

The logic of Cuvier's narrative here is what White would call a plot of Satire. According to White, there are four standard kinds of stories that historians tell. Satire, for White, is "a drama dominated by the apprehension that man is ultimately a captive of the world rather than its master, and by the recognition that, in the final analysis, human consciousness and will are always inadequate to the task of overcoming definitively the dark force of death, which is man's unremitting enemy" (9). The Satire plot, then, is a narrative of the failure of human ambitions, of the inadequacy of

human productions in the face of death. For White, this failure is expressed in the rhetorical trope of Irony, which is associated with Satire (37). Indeed, I have already attempted to call attention to Cuvier's flirtations with irony. And while Cuvier does not provide a well-developed historiography in the tradition of one of White's quintessential nineteenth-century historians, his historiography risks the possibility of presenting the history of the earth as a dark satire.

There is a hint of repetition in White's definition of Satire, a suggestion of the repeated inability of human consciousness to elude death. A similar hint appears in the logic of Cuvier's narrative. Although he does not explicitly identify it as such, it is possible to read Cuvier's narrative as potentially—and loosely—cyclical. This loose version of cyclicality depends on the idea of grand catastrophe as recurring. In Cuvier's history, catastrophes have happened in the past and can (will?) happen again in the future. Once Cuvier sets in motion a narrative of unexpected, unpredictable catastrophe in the past, it becomes difficult to protect the present and the future from such catastrophe.

But what are the consequences of a type of cyclicality in catastrophic history? The question of the relationship between cyclical time and catastrophe is a central preoccupation of Mircea Eliade. In *Cosmos and History*, Eliade diagnoses what he calls a "depreciation of history" that takes the form of a "rejection of profane, continuous time" (xi). It is "the man of traditional civilizations" who refuses to live in such historical time, under the regime of a linear and universal timeline composed of successive contingent events (141). Such a man, in contrast to "modern man," holds a

"negative attitude toward history": "whether he devaluates it by perpetually finding transhistorical models and archetypes for it, [or] whether, finally, he gives it a metahistorical meaning (cyclical theory, eschatological significations, and so on)" (141). Eliade distinguishes between two modalities of experiencing history: modern man finds himself in a history without meaning, whereas traditional man reads history metahistorically or transhistorically—providing a broader narrative that makes sense of the contingency of "continuous time." For modern man, history is what exists; for traditional man, history is a symptom of deeper causes or patterns.

The question here, for Eliade, is how one can live with the possibility of catastrophe, whether it is possible to find an explanation for it that provides some modicum of psychic comfort or relief. These are the stakes:

> In our day, when historical pressure no longer allows any escape, how can man tolerate the catastrophes and horrors of history—from collective deportations and massacres to atomic bombings—if beyond them he can glimpse no sign, no transhistorical meaning; if they are only the blind play of economic, social, or political forces, or even worse, only the result of the 'liberties' that a minority takes and exercises directly on the stage of universal history? (151)

The relief, the way to tolerate the sheer overwhelming contingency of catastrophe, is then to locate or produce meaning in history. One way to do so is to subscribe to a worldview that offers justification for catastrophe, through recourse to a causal,

controlling agent behind seemingly contingent events. This is the strategy of reading such horrors as "signs of the divine will or of an astral fatality" (143).

The second escape, Eliade suggests, is through an embrace of cyclicality. This is a reading of history as a cycle with a beginning and an end and the potential for repetition. Eliade traces such a worldview through ancient and traditional civilizations, noting that "for those who believed in a repetition of an entire cosmic cycle, as for those who believed only in a single cycle nearing its end, the drama of contemporary history was necessary and inevitable" (132). From within such a cycle, meaning is produced by the fact that one is caught within that very cycle. By the nature of the existence of history as a cycle, Eliade argues, "none of the catastrophes manifested in history was arbitrary" (133). Cyclicality produces its own meaning.

Yet, what would it mean to think about Cuvier's catastrophist narrative in this way? I have argued that Cuvier's story of geological history is potentially cyclical. World-remaking catastrophes have repeated throughout history and are likely to continue to do so. However, there is something profoundly historical about Cuvier's narrative; he is not attempting to find a reference point outside of history, but rather to describe the way history appears as contingent. After all, as I noted earlier, Foucault credited Cuvier with bringing "*l'historicité*" into the history of life. Cuvier's narrative offers no way of understanding history beyond the likelihood that—at some unspecified point in the future—catastrophe will recur. In Cuvier's narrative, catastrophe is inevitable, but it is also, in an important sense, arbitrary. There is no meaning to be found here.

Does such a formal cyclicality, a cyclicality that seems to resist meaning, offer some comfort or some escape from the horrors of history? Cuvier does not tell us. As I have read him, Cuvier offers us a catastrophe narrative that does not, for the most part, describe the experience of life inside that narrative. Occasional moments of imaginative sympathy aside, Cuvier does little to unpack the epistemological, phenomenological, and affective consequences of catastrophism. To understand the experience of life in a catastrophist world, we must turn to a novelist—George Eliot and *The Mill on the Floss*.

George Eliot: Temporality and Affect in a Catastrophist World

In the first part of this chapter, I focused on eighteenth and nineteenth-century geological narratives of catastrophe as a way of thinking about how catastrophe becomes part of our understanding of history. In the remainder of this chapter, I look toward the novel as a way of thinking about how such catastrophe narratives impinge on and become part of everyday experience. I rely on the implicit influence of natural history on the novel. *The Mill on the Floss* is, in an important way, a way of working through specific implications of the narrative logic proposed by Cuvier and other geological historians. While *The Mill on the Floss* is by no means a geological or historical treatise, it provides a way of thinking about specific consequences of recent developments in scientific geology.

George Eliot's representation of catastrophe was informed by her interest in science.[7] An increasingly large body of early and mid-nineteenth-century science was available to Eliot and became part of the background for her novels. As Diana Postelthwaite notes, during this period, "science [...] was provocatively within reach of both the novelist and her readers" (99). Numerous critics, including Postelthwaite, Sally Shuttleworth, and Gillian Beer, have traced Eliot's direct engagement with science in her novels. One key aspect of Eliot's scientific project was her concern with the science of social life and the implications of Comte's positivism (Shuttleworth 17-19). However, this focus on social life (what we might now call social science) did not preclude a strong engagement with biological and geological science. Postelthwaite points out that, by her early twenties (in the late 1830s and early 1840s), Eliot was already reading across a wide spectrum of scientific literature—including geology (103). During this time, she read William Buckland's influential Bridgewater Treatise on the relationship between geology and theology, as well as Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology*. Her interest in biological and geological science increased as part of her relationship with George Henry Lewes in the early 1850s; when they met in 1852, Lewes was working on an article about the development of species as part of an ongoing conversation with Herbert Spencer (Postelthwaite 107). Indeed, together Eliot and Lewes amassed a sizeable library of scientific works—including, according to a catalogue compiled after Eliot's death, several books by Cuvier (Baker 46-47).

[7] I will refer to Marian Evans as George Eliot throughout, even when speaking of periods of her early life before her adoption of that pen name.

As critics have noted, *The Mill on the Floss*—published in 1860—corresponds to a very specific period in Eliot's scientific autobiography. Rosemary Ashton points out that Eliot's novel followed the publication of Lewes's *Sea-Side Studies* (1858), a chronicle of his trips (with Eliot) along the coasts of England and Wales to study marine life (30-31). Lewes's interest in the development of species was part of a broader cultural conversation, as Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was published the following year. Indeed, Eliot and Lewes read Darwin's book immediately—although Eliot's familiarity with the debate as well as Lewes's work caused her "to underrate [Darwin's] importance," as she believed that many of his ideas to have already been well established (Ashton 31).

During this same period, more narrowly geological questions were also on Eliot's mind. According to Jonathan Smith, Eliot was also at this time reading Mary Somerville's *Physical Geography*, "a popular work that included an account of the last half-century's geology" (437). Based on her reading, it is clear that the question of living creatures and their relationship to their environments was a significant preoccupation of Eliot's during the composition of *The Mill on the Floss*.

How then are we to read *The Mill on the Floss*, with its catastrophic climactic flood, in terms of natural history? I would not be the first critic to suggest that the novel relies on a version of Cuvier's geology. As Shuttleworth notes, "the concluding flood does not conform to theories of organic evolution but rather to the historical schema of catastrophism" (53). The question of the novel's precise geology, however, has sparked a debate among critics about Eliot's specific commitments in the field of

geological theory. For example, Smith argues that Eliot's geological perspective in the novel actually attempts to refute catastrophism by offering a (geologically non-orthodox) version of Lyell's alternative theory of geological change, uniformitarianism (444-46).[8]

Although, in terms of pure geology, I tend to find a catastrophist reading of *The Mill on the Floss* more convincing than Smith's modified uniformitarian reading, my project here does not require a strict focus on the orthodoxy of nineteenth-century geological systems. Rather, I am more interested in the type of narrative structure that Eliot relies on here, regardless of whether it is purely Cuvier-ian or whether it offers concessions to Lyell. Regardless of the geological difficulties that can be raised by the question of Cuvier vs. Lyell, Eliot's novel can be read—as I have read Cuvier's work—as a narrative of cyclical catastrophe.

This does not mean that Cuvier and Eliot are telling quite the same story, or telling the story in the same way. The key difference, for my purposes, between Cuvier and Eliot is a difference of scale. For all of Cuvier's moments of imaginative sympathy, his momentary focus on the plights of mollusks and mammoths, the scale of his project remains grand—both temporally and spatially. In terms of time, he is trying to connect the mass of geological time with the whole of human history; in space, he is trying to account for the history of the entire archaeologically known

[8] According to Smith, Lyell's uniformitarianism consisted of "several important uniformities [...]: gradualism, actualism, and nonprogressionalism. Gradualism is the assumption that geological forces operate slowly over long periods of time. Actualism is the assumption that the rates and intensities of these forces have always been the same [...]. [N]onprogressionalism [...] is the assumption that the continuous change taking place is both the organic and inorganic worlds is not directional" (431-32).

world. And although he is modest in some of his claims, he is still offering an explanation for how much of the current world came to be and, as I suggest, how it may well end.

In contrast, *The Mill on the Floss* is interested in nothing so grand. Eliot's novel *domesticates* the catastrophe narrative. *The Mill on the Floss* places catastrophe not only in human history (as Cuvier's project already attempts to do), but in particular human lives. The novel is not solely a narrative of disaster. It is also a narrative of disaster that is bound to the experiences of the Tulliver family. Eliot explores a catastrophe narrative as experienced by specific human beings. Cuvier's project was to offer a catastrophist vision of the world; Eliot's project is to ask how humans experience their being in that world.

The world in Eliot's novel is indeed much more constrained than Cuvier's broad geological canvas. And yet, its geology still matters. The first sentence of the novel sets us immediately in the natural world: "A wide plain, where the broadening Floss hurries on between its green banks to the sea, and the loving tide, rushing to meet it, checks its passage with an impetuous embrace" (53). We are immediately introduced to the geological features of the setting—provided with a type of verbal map of the plain and the river Floss. And yet, the description here is not solely geological. The narrative engages in Ruskin's pathetic fallacy, reading nature through the lens of human emotion and intention. The river "hurries" to the "loving tide" which offers an "impetuous embrace." Already, we can see Eliot's attempt to bring

geological activity into the purview of human experience, into the sphere of affect and intention.

On this original map of the Floss cutting across its wide flood plain, the narrator continues to add additional landmarks. First is the town of St Ogg's, "which shows its aged, fluted red roofs and the broad gables of its wharves between the low wooded hill and the river brink." Then there are the "rich pastures and the patches of dark earth." Then, "just by the red-roofed town the tributary Ripple flows with a lively current into the Floss" (53). It is on this smaller river that we find Dorlcote Mill, home of the Tullivers. The opening chapter recreates the physical geography in which almost the entire novel will unfold. The Tullivers have been situated in space.

And once they are situated, the narrator can begin to tell their story. At the very end of the opening chapter, the narrator finally notes that "before I dozed off, I was going to tell you what Mr and Mrs Tulliver were talking about as they sat by the bright fire in the lefthand parlour on that very afternoon I have been dreaming of" (55). But as the opening chapter (and this passage) situates the Tullivers, it also situates this narrator herself.[9] Indeed, the narrator also belongs to this space, albeit at a temporal distance of "many years" (55). As she notes, "I remember those large dipping willows... I remember the stone bridge..." (53, ellipses in original). The narrator's presence in the physical space of the story provides us with another locus of

[9] The sex of the narrator is unspecified in the novel, but, by her commentary on women's fashion, is clearly coded as a woman. Critics have traditionally referred to her as such.

experience for the catastrophe narrative. The Tullivers are not the only ones who experience this catastrophe.

Once the narrator's presence has been established and the physical geography of St Ogg's has been mapped, the narrative turns to the story of the Tullivers, specifically the relationship between Maggie and her brother Tom as they grow up at Dorlcote Mill and become adults. The novel traces their childhood, Tom's haphazard schooling, Maggie's isolation, the ruin of the family business and Tom's attempts to repair the family fortunes. The narrative is focalized mainly through Maggie, aspiring toward a *Bildungsroman* within a field of sibling conflict. And yet, the *Bildung*—in an important sense—fails. Maggie disgraces herself with an aborted attempt to elope with her cousin's fiancé. Tom disowns her. Finally, the siblings are briefly reunited in a boat during the climactic flood that submerges St Ogg's—only, alas, so that they can drown together. It is in the brief space of the lives of the Tulliver children that we experience catastrophe in the novel.

However, while the flood of St. Ogg's is the only catastrophe that is directly narrated in the time of the novel, it is not the only one we can glimpse. Catastrophes are part of the collective memory of the novel. The threat of recurring flood has even become part of the foundational myth of St Ogg's itself. In that story, the boatman Ogg agrees to ferry a mysterious woman across the Floss; in return, he is blessed with a boat that cannot sink, even in the greatest of floods. The legend claims that "when the floods came, many were saved by reason of that blessing on the boat" (182). Indeed, according to the legend, Ogg's blessed boat could still be seen as an

apparition after his death, "witnessed in the floods of after-time" (183). And while the narrator refuses to offer full credence to the legend, she does suggest in it a germ of historical truth: "This legend, one sees, reflects from a far-off time the visitation of the floods, which even when they left human life untouched, were widely fatal to the helpless cattle, and swept as sudden death over all smaller living things" (183). The narrator reads the legend as a way of making sense—in "a far-off time"—of the cyclical floods that come suddenly upon the plain. These "visitations," she suggests, provide the foundational myth for the town of St. Ogg's.

But while the legend of St. Ogg's acknowledges its basic susceptibility to catastrophe, there are more local, more private stories that speak of the floods as well. The Tulliver family and their employees collect and repeat a set of these tales, a set of tales that seems deeply personal. There is Tom and Maggie's favorite fishing spot,"the Round Pool—that wonderful pool, which the floods had made a long while ago" (92). The free indirect narration here clearly offers, through the use of the slightly hyperbolic word "wonderful," the possibility that the description of the Round Pool belongs to Tom and Maggie themselves. Tom's father remembers how "he had sat listening on a low stool on winter evenings while his father talked of the old half-timbered mill that had been there before the last great floods, which damaged it so that his grandfather pulled it down and built the new one" (352). This story places the Tulliver's own mill and their family tree in direct relation to the recurring floods, and yet there is something about it that does not seem entirely historical. Rather, it has become a family legend, something to be repeated again and again to children on

"winter evenings." Indeed, this story takes its place alongside other legends about the mill, such as Mr. Tulliver's recollection to his assistant Luke that "there's a story as when the mill changes hands, the river's angry—I've heard my father say it many a time" (352). There is a body of Tulliver-specific myth that has developed to make sense of Dorlcote Mill and its history. In the case of the this final legend, however, Mr. Tulliver speaks not only to the past, but prospectively toward the future and what may happen when the mill leaves the hands of the Tulliver family (as it does for a period of time in the novel). Based on these myths, the anger of the river is not a possibility that can be entirely confined to the past.

But, as in Cuvier's *Discours*, the history of catastrophe in *The Mill on the Floss* is not to be read only in myth and history; it also can be read in the geography of everyday life. In the novel, catastrophe leaves its traces on the landscape along the Floss and beyond. It is this legibility of past disaster that interests the narrator. She notes that St. Ogg's "carries the traces of its long growth and history, like a millennial tree" (181). The metaphor here invokes a natural text, not Balzac's chunk of gypsum, but rather the rings of an ancient tree. In this text—in cross section—one can read the events of a tree's life—including the scars that signal natural disaster. In the "rings" of St. Ogg's then, the narrator offers the possibility of reading its full history. And indeed, the narrator does just this type of reading at the end of the novel, as she traces the aftermath of the flood that destroys much of the town and kills Tom and Maggie:

> Nature repairs her ravages—but not all. The uptorn trees are not rooted again—the parted hills are left scarred: if there is a new growth, the trees are

> not the same as the old, and the hills underneath their green vesture bear the marks of the past rending. To the eyes that have dwelt on the past, there is no thorough repair. (656)

Despite the possibility of some "repair," the history of the catastrophe remains written on the landscape: in the "scar[s]" and "marks of the past rending" and in the more subtle losses that cannot be replaced, the "uptorn trees" which cannot be re-rooted but which are replaced by trees that are "not the same." All of this is apparent to one who knows how to recognize it—in this case, "to the eyes that have dwelt on the past." The sense of this phrase here is double. It clearly speaks to the narrator's own experience as a resident of St. Ogg's in the past. To a person who knows what was there before (whose eyes "have dwelt on the past"), the differences in the aftermath of the flood should be apparent. And yet, we can read the phrase more generally, as an acknowledgment of geological memory and a recognition of the type of vision that Cuvier promoted, a vision that understands history can not only be read but re-created from geology. These are eyes that can dwell on (by recreating) the past from the evidence in the present.

It is this type of vision that the narrator employs in the famous (though, as Ashton complains, "rather opaque" [38]) chapter that opens the fourth book of the novel. It is a remarkable intermission from the plot of the novel as it had developed to this point and I will quote it at length:

> Journeying down the Rhône on a summer's day, you have perhaps felt the sunshine made dreary by those ruined villages which stud the banks in certain

> parts of its course, telling how the swift river once rose, like an angry, destroying god sweeping down the feeble generations whose breath is in their nostrils and making their dwellings a desolation. Strange contrast, you may have thought, between the effect produced on us by these dismal remnants of commonplace houses, which in their best days were but the sign of a sordid life, belonging in all its details to our own vulgar era—and the effect produced by those ruins on the castled Rhine which have crumbled and mellowed into such harmony with the green and rocky steeps, that they seem to have a natural fitness [...]. Therefore it is that these Rhine castles thrill me with a sense of poetry: they belong to the grand historic life of humanity and raise up for me the vision of an epoch. But these dead-tinted, hollow-eyed, angular skeletons of villages on the Rhône, oppress me with the feeling that human life—very much of it—is a narrow, ugly, grovelling existence, which even calamity does not elevate, but rather tends to exhibit in all its bare vulgarity of conception; and I have a cruel conviction that the lives these ruins are the traces of were part of a gross sum of obscure vitality, that will be swept into the same oblivion with the generations of ants and beavers. (362)

This is an extraordinarily rich—and extraordinarily dark—passage. The second person pronoun serves as the subject of the first sentence. This vision is thus not merely the narrator's vision; it may be ("perhaps") yours as well. In this moment, the narrator is opening up her experience as a reader of catastrophe to invite you to join her. From that point, she walks us through the reading of the ruins that "tell" us of

past catastrophe, the houses that were a "sign" of past lives, and the "vision" of the grandeur of the castles of the Rhine. The metaphor of vision goes even further, as the narrator suggests that "calamity" itself can "exhibit" to us the "bare vulgarity" of life. We are familiar by now with the language here of both vision and sign; this is also, potentially, the language of reading. And yet, the narrator seems to go beyond pure reading here.

Just as Cuvier brought an imaginative sympathy to the deaths of mollusks and mammoths, Eliot's narrator here imagines the last moments of the villagers along the Rhône, who were drowned with their "breath [...] in their nostrils." The move that Eliot makes here, in contrast to Cuvier, is in the domestication of his geological memory. We are no longer speaking of creatures that predated the existence of humans entirely; rather, we are talking about human beings who lived in homes and castles, dwellings that are now "skeletons" (as, indeed, are the humans who lived there). This is not a demand for sympathy with ancient animals, but rather a description of the destruction of people who we might well be able to recognize as like us. This is a horrifyingly intimate moment, made more so by the narrator's earlier use of the second person to implicate us in her vision here.

However, there is a breakdown of the imaginative sympathy that is pressed into the service of the recovery of historical and geological memory here. The narrator is horrified by her vision, but there is more to the narrator's horror in this passage than the recognition that "calamity" can suddenly lay waste to both villages and castles. There is the narrator's palpable disgust at the lives that are destroyed by

the floods on the Rhône: lives that are "feeble," "dismal," "sordid," "vulgar," and finally "narrow, ugly, grovelling." The narrator's objection here is to the *kinds* of lives that these traces suggest. The narrator recoils from her reading of the signs along the Rhône. These lives were not heroic or part of the "historic life" that took place alongside the Rhine; rather, there is almost *no* history in the lives that are destroyed along the Rhône—at least no individual histories. Instead, what the Rhône ruins offer is the sense that human lives can be aggregated into "a gross sum of obscure vitality" that has as little individual meaning as the mass sum of the "generations of ants and beavers." For the narrator, then, what we (and it is, indeed, *we*) can read along the banks of the Rhône is the suggestion that human life is somehow just *life*, in the same category as animal life. There is a tension here between the narrator's imagination of the singularly intimate sense of the final moments of life that the narrator offers us (the "breath [...] in their nostrils") and the suggestion that these lives are not at all singular or individual (the "sum of obscure vitality"). This is the conflict that Eliot's narrator identifies in Cuvier's flights of imaginative sympathy: the way the traces of catastrophes speak to the final moments of individual lives, but reveal the difficulty or impossibility of recovering all of the individual experiences that were destroyed. This difficulty will cause Eliot to limit the mortality from the novel's final catastrophic flood, in an attempt to remain focused on the intimate experience of catastrophe.[10]

[10] The novel states explicitly (and, I would suggest, unconvincingly) that the climactic flood kills *only* Tom and Maggie: "every man and woman mentioned in this history was still living—except those whose end we know" (656).

But although the narrator can read catastrophe and invites us to join her, not everyone else in the novel can do so—or, more accurately, many choose not to do so. The narrator describes the town's mindset as resolutely focused on the present: "the mind of St. Ogg's did not look extensively before or after. It inherited a long past without thinking of it, and had no eyes for the spirits that walked the streets" (184). The mind of St. Ogg's, then, refuses to be *haunted* by the traces of the past—the "spirits that walked the streets" which, in a return to the metaphor of vision, the residents have "no eyes for." However, the narrator quickly clarifies that this myopia does not necessarily mean an entire ignorance of the past. As she notes, "the present time was like a level plain where men lose their belief in volcanoes and earthquakes, thinking to-morrow will be as yesterday and the giant forces that used to shake the earth are for ever laid to sleep" (184). In this passage, the narrator deploys a spatial metaphor (the "level plain") to convey a temporal location ("the present time"). And not just any spatial metaphor, but a geological one. In this passage Eliot seems to most clearly to place her narrative into a geological context.

Shuttleworth reads this passage as specific commentary on the question of catastrophism vs. uniformitarianism: "the uniformitarianism which supplanted catastrophe theory suddenly appears as the product of complacency, of blindness [...]. The flood which ends the novel, may be seen, on one level, as a final vindication of catastrophe theory" (63). In this reading, the final flood is a type of geohistorical lesson to the both the people of St. Ogg's and, more generally, a swipe at the uniformitarian geological consensus of Eliot's own time. Yet, this novel does more

than rehearse a catastrophist narrative of cyclical destruction; it also explores how it feels to live inside such a narrative. To understand this part of the novel's project, we must turn away from the present-focused blindness of St. Ogg's to consider the final catastrophe and its relation to the Tullivers.

The flood that inundates St. Ogg's and drowns Tom and Maggie has caused a certain uneasiness in critics since the novel was published. Henry James, writing in 1866, famously complained that "the story is told as if it were destined to have, if not a strictly happy termination, at least one within ordinary probabilities. As it stands, the *dénouement* shocks the reader most painfully. Nothing has prepared him for it; the story does not move towards it; it casts no shadow before it" (490). Barbara Hardy takes issue with James's own blindness here, as she notes that the novel strongly foreshadows its climax: "Even the characters are ingeniously though artificially involved in the pre-echoes as Mrs. Tulliver fretfully worries about her children being brought home drowned, or about Maggie tumbling in some day, and as Philip teases Maggie about selling her soul to the ghostly boatman on the Floss" (46-47). Even so, Hardy objects to the artificiality of these "pre-echoes," noting that "most of the hints and images and descriptions could be cut without much loss of lucidity" (47). For Hardy, then, these moments are merely signposts placed in the text by Eliot in order to prepare the reader for the novel's catastrophic climax. But what if we read these "pre-echoes" not as markers of the underlying catastrophic narrative structure (which, of course, they are), but as part of the diegesis itself? How can a catastrophe announce itself in the world before its actual arrival?

This is a question of alternate modes of temporality. The underlying question, in its broadest formulation, would be: when does something happen? Or, to rephrase slightly, how can we locate an event in time? From the perspective of a certain type of scientific or historical discourse, based on a conception of time as universal and linear, such a question would seem to make little sense. Indeed, such a question would not have been coherent to Cuvier. The impetus behind his project was to find a way to place geological and historical events on a continuum in which they relate to each other in the same temporal plane. The narrative logic of Cuvier's project is embedded in certain assumptions about the possibility of ordering events in such a way that we can fix them in time. However, once we begin to consider how Cuvier's history becomes part of human consciousness—as we consider the lived experience of his narrative logic—the question of the temporal location of a catastrophic event becomes more vexed.

We owe much of our understanding of the temporality of the phenomenological experience of an event to psychological and novelistic discourses. Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*, for example, offers one possibility for how events that happen in the temporal past can be revised or recognized as events in the present. As J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis note in their explication: "deferred action [*Nachträglichkeit*] may also suggest a conception of temporality which was brought to the fore by philosophers [...]: consciousness constitutes its own past, constantly subjecting its meaning to revision" (112). Events in the past are not necessarily events

in the past; indeed, events may coalesce from past experience only after they are recognized or constructed as such by consciousness in the present.

Similarly, how are we to read the temporality of events in the work of a novelist such as Proust? Considering Proust's lack of interest in traditional linear narration, Terdiman suggests that "it is not easy to say when a Proustian event takes place" (*Dialectics* 101). The narrative structure of Proust's novel is such that the events Marcel narrates in *À la recherche du temps perdu* have always already happened. However, there is a way such past events do not remain in the past; rather, they spring again and again—involuntarily, in several cases—into the narrator's present. As Terdiman notes, "a Proustian event occurs whenever the teller's memory falls upon it" (102). The temporality of such remembered events complicates an attempt to unambiguously assign the occurrence of events to the past or to the present. To adapt a phrase from Terdiman: more than the present is present in the present.[11]

Such an interweaving of temporalities can even be considered a type of haunting, in which the present is haunted by another time. Carla Freccero has developed just such a model of "spectrality," drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida. As Freccero defines it, "*Spectrality* [...] describe[s] a mode of historical attentiveness that the living might have to what is not present but somehow appears as a figure or voice [...] that is no longer or not yet with us" (69-70, emphasis in original). Like the Proustian narrative that can contain pieces of both the past and the future, a spectral

[11] In his discussion of "post-Revolutionary time" in *Present Past*, Terdiman notes that "much more than the present seemed present in the present" (244).

experience of time can be haunted from the past (the "no longer") and from the future (the "not yet"). Freccero notes that "[s]pectrality is, in part, a mode of historicity: it describes the way in which 'the time is out of joint'; that is, the way the past or the future presses upon us with a kind of insistence or demand, a demand to which we must somehow respond" (70). As a "mode of historicity," Freccero's spectrality offers a way of being in the world in which both the past and future refuse to be isolated from the present, but rather appear to us and require a response.

Of course, such temporal knots and hauntings are commonly associated with both Freud and Proust. It seems more quixotic to consider temporal anomalies in the works of a reputed arch-realist such as George Eliot. However, in order to account for some of the catastrophic features of the narrative, Shuttleworth has offered a reading of the novel that raises just such questions of temporality. Though I find her reading unsatisfying, it is worth considering it in some detail. Shuttleworth makes sense of the novel by breaking it into two narratives: one linear and one atemporal. She argues that it "possesses two beginnings and two endings [...]. It opens, first, with the narrator's Proust-like submergence into the world of unconscious memory, and, second, with the start of the linear, conscious narration of the story" (52-53). The narrator's retrospective memories of life in St. Ogg's provide the atemporal narrative; the story of the Tullivers provides the linear narrative. And yet, according to Shuttleworth, the novel ends with a narrative chiasmus, such that Maggie and Tom—in drowning—"enter the timeless world of memory and the unconscious" whereas the narrator offers hope for linear progress by describing the repair of St. Ogg's after the

flood (53). The difference between these two narrative strands and their temporalities is that they belong to separate levels of consciousness: "conscious narration" vs. "dream narrative" (66). As Shuttleworth argues, "the function of dreams and the unconscious in *The Mill on the Floss* is thus to undercut ideas of psychological unity and of historical continuity. With a theory of the unconscious, George Eliot introduces the idea of a plurality of time scales" (66). Temporality collapses into psychology (and vice versa); consciousness inhabits one temporal space, and the unconscious another.

For Shuttleworth, the coexistence between these two levels of consciousness (and their associated narratives) in the novel is an uneasy one. Indeed, the uneasiness is the point. Relying on Edward Said's distinction between realism and modernism, Shuttleworth characterizes the *The Mill on the Floss* as being "concerned less with continuity and origins than with discontinuity and construction" (54). The contradictory temporalities and the multiple levels of consciousness mark it not as a realist text, but rather, as a proto-modernist text. The question of multiple temporalities in *The Mill on the Floss* is a question of realism and one of its "others," namely modernism.

There is another way of reading the discontinuity of this novel. I think Shuttleworth's reading of the novel as a modernist text is productive and I appreciate the precision with which she identifies the multiple levels of consciousness that drive the novel's temporal conflicts. However, there is something reductive in identifying the Tulliver narrative as "linear" and "realist." It is too simple to assign a progressive

temporality to the "conscious narration" in the novel. I agree with Shuttleworth that the Tulliver narrative relies on a type of realism, that this narrative is embedded in a version of historical continuity. However, the version of historical continuity here exists beneath the shadow of catastrophe. The Tullivers don't just live in a world; they live in a catastrophist world. And as I have argued, this world has specific consequences for the temporality of the Tullivers' narrative, consequences that the Tullivers themselves experience acutely.

What are these consequences? They bring us back to Hardy's "pre-echoes" of the novel's final flood, the flood that will claim the lives of Tom and Maggie. These are not only extradiegetic cues that foreshadow, to the reader, the eventual end of the story; they are also part of the narrative itself. Consider the exclamation of Mrs. Tulliver, early in the novel, as she contemplates the fact that Tom has left Maggie sitting alone by the pond: "'They're such children for the water, mine are,' she said aloud, without reflecting that there was no one to hear her. 'They'll be brought in dead and drownded some day. I wish that river was far enough" (166). In one sense, we can read Mrs. Tulliver's statement here as an expression of a recurring fear, something along the lines of "[I am afraid that] they'll be brought in dead and drownded some day." We can also read it, slightly differently, as a type of prediction: "[I believe/expect that] they'll be brought in dead and drownded some day." However, we also must read it with the recognition that Mrs. Tulliver is exactly right—Tom and Maggie will indeed be brought in dead and drowned some day. Her statement is thus also a simple statement of fact. But reading it this way raises the question of the

temporal status of this statement. What we find here, I suggest, is an intrusion of the diegetic future into the diegetic present.

In a catastrophist world, it is not only the past that can be conjured up in the present. Much in the same way that past catastrophe haunts the Tullivers (both unconsciously and, as I suggested earlier, consciously), catastrophe haunts from the future as well. Hardy's "pre-echoes" should not be read solely as signals to the type of narrative that we are reading; they must also be considered as expressions of the type of world in which that narrative is taking place. The Tulliver narrative is not a typical linear, realist narrative of progress; rather, it is a narrative that is continually haunted by the simultaneous temporalities of premonitory catastrophe. The conscious narration that Shuttleworth establishes as a counterpoint to the plural temporalities of the unconscious in the novel is in itself a plural temporality, containing—at the same time—traumatic memories of the past and premonitory knowledge of the future. From the perspective of a given consciousness, all catastrophist narratives are multi-temporal or, to use the term that Shuttleworth applies to the world of the unconscious, atemporal.

When I call catastrophist narrative atemporal, there are at least two potential understandings of that term. One possible version of atemporality is the one that Eliot herself seems to suggest in the very first sentence of *Middlemarch*, which begins with the following clause: "Who that cares much to know the history of man, and how the mysterious mixture behaves under the varying experiments of Time [...]" (3). Time here is personified as an observer who sees all and who performs experiments, from a

perspective that is outside direct human experience. As Russell West-Pavlov argues, this figure of Time "is an anthropomorphic allegory for what, by the nineteenth century, had become a hegemonic notion of absolute time" (36). From a viewpoint outside of time, where the entire scope of human history can be taken into account, all events can be surveyed at once. This is the atemporality of a narrator who has access to the full story. This is the type of narrative position that Buffon adopts, and one that Cuvier uneasily adapts—a position that allows a human narrator to provide us with a narrative of a large portion of the history of the earth—including what, to us, remains in the future. And indeed, Eliot provides just such a narrator in *The Mill on the Floss*: the elderly woman who opens the tale with the description of the Floss and Dorlcote Mill and who then (omnisciently) narrates the tale that happened "many years" ago. From the perspective of this narrator, *The Mill on the Floss* is strangely analogous to Cuvier's catastrophist narrative of the history of the earth; both narratives are grasped nearly as a whole, from some distance.

If this first version of atemporality requires, to continue with the spatial metaphor, an expansion of time (the surveying of vast stretches of time from a distance), the second version relies, instead, on a compression of time. This is not time as it experienced by an outside observer; there is nothing impersonal about this temporality. Rather, it is an experience of time that is tied to a specific consciousness or subject embedded within a catastrophist narrative. In this version, it is any given moment of experience that is multi-temporal: shot through with shards from the past and from the future. Each of these present moments does not contain, of course, the

whole of the past and the entirety of the future; the moment is not atemporal because all of time can be experienced. Rather, there is both something of the past and something of the future present in any given moment. This is not the experience of the omniscient narrator of *The Mill on the Floss*, then, but rather the experience of the Tullivers. And it is through their experience that the novel describes what it is like to live in a catastrophist world.

Eliot is interested in the question of multi-temporality in experience not for its own sake, but in terms of its consequences. The novel—through the Tullivers—is engaged with the question of how one lives with this knowledge of impending catastrophe. What type of orientation to the world is required by the multi-temporal knowledge of the end of that very world? What affective or emotional experiences correspond to life in a catastrophist world? How does it feel to live in a world that you always already know is doomed?

To begin to answer these questions, I want to return again to the scene in which Mrs. Tulliver expresses her fear that Maggie has "drownded" in the Round Pool. As Tom is sent to retrieve her, Mrs. Tulliver muses on Maggie as "that fatal child" and reflects (as we have already seen) on the future of both children ("They'll be brought in dead and drownded some day") [166]. The narrative then notes that "when she not only failed to discern Maggie, but presently saw Tom returning from the pool alone, this hovering fear entered and took complete possession of her" (166-67). Mrs. Tulliver's fear here is oriented toward the future, toward an expected outcome: Maggie's doom. In this sense, this type of fear, like catastrophe itself,

collapses temporal distinctions. It is a fear that the future (Maggie's death) has arrived, that it is here in the present.

It is not only Mrs. Tulliver who is affectively oriented toward the coming catastrophe. Tom also experiences an acute sense of what will happen with the Floss at the end of the novel. As he walks along the river, he converses with his playmate Bob:

> 'He's none so full now, the Floss isn't,' said Bob [...]. 'Why, last 'ear, the meadows was all one sheet o' water, they was.'
>
> 'Ay, but,' said Tom, [...], 'but there was a big flood once when the Round Pool was made. *I* know there was, 'cause father says so. And the sheep and cows were all drowned, and the boats went all over the fields in such a way.'
>
> '*I* don't care about a flood comin',' said Bob, 'I don't mind the water, no more nor the land. I'd swim—*I* would.'
>
> 'Ah, but if you got nothing to eat for ever so long?' said Tom, his imagination becoming quite active under the stimulus of that dread. (103-04; emphases in original)

While the affect here is future-directed, it is brought into being through a consideration of the past. Bob's memories of the submerged meadows and Tom's knowledge of a past "big flood" (based on his father's authority) provide a precedent for the future visitation of fluvial catastrophe. This is an affective experience that relies both on what is expected and what is previously experienced (and the way that the former produces knowledge of the latter). This passage offers a name for the

chronic affective orientation toward catastrophe in this novel: dread. Although, Tom's dread in this passage may be, most immediately, a sly joke about Tom's imagining having "nothing to eat for ever so long," it can also be read more broadly here, as an affective response that encompasses the entire catastrophic flood (and not only the lack of food that would result).

By thinking of dread as an affective orientation toward future catastrophe, I am relying on a more or less standard understanding of that emotion. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (first definition), dread is "extreme fear; deep awe or reverence; apprehension or anxiety as to future events." This definition captures both the affective valence (fearful, anxious) and the temporal orientation (focused on the future). However, I should also note that, in relying on this version of dread, I am departing from a significant philosophical tradition that uses the term to mean something different. This is, of course, the tradition of Kierkegaard and Heidegger. While Lisabeth During has offered a reading of Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* in terms of Kierkegaardian dread, I would suggest that During's focus on "dread [as] fear in the face of nothing rather than something" differentiates the dread that I am writing about here from a type of existential dread that is focused less on certain catastrophe and more on a sense of mortality in general (93). And while it is possible that Eliot's conception of dread may have changed in the more than fifteen years between *The Mill on the Floss* and *Daniel Deronda*, it is clear that Eliot's use of the word in the former novel always depends (implicitly or explicitly) on a specific future event that is being dreaded—a "something" rather than a "nothing." This is the type of dread

that belongs to a world where the future is—in a very real and specific sense—already known.

To this point in my discussion of dread, I have ignored recent critical debates that have attempted to bring greater rigor to the use of terms such as "affect" and "emotion." I have used these words more or less interchangeably so far. By doing so, I am not expressing my own theoretical confusion, but rather suggesting that the status of the feeling of dread in Eliot's novel is not entirely clear. In one sense, dread in the novel is what Fredric Jameson calls a "named emotion" (29). Jameson posits this term as the "binary opposite of affect [...] (or at least the term whose difference allows us best to articulate the latter's identity)" (31). The issue that produces this binary is one of representability: named emotion can be (by definition) named, whereas affect resists language, requiring "poets and novelists [...] to seize its fleeting essence and to force its recognition" (31). Dread in *The Mill on the Floss* does not seem to necessitate any such effort on the part of Eliot; it is commonly named emotion and its valence in the novel corresponds to its dictionary definition. Intriguingly, Jameson's reading of the reification of named emotion goes one step further. He suggests that named emotions become associated with characters as signals of the future; that they serve as "marks of destiny" for characters (44). And in this sense, the emotion of dread in Eliot's novel seems to comply, providing a narrative clue to the destinies of Tom and Maggie.

However, there is something more equivocal about the status of dread in the novel than Jameson's binary opposition would seem to capture. While it is clearly a

named emotion in the novel and functions like one, dread also appears to evince qualities that are traditionally associated with affect. Brian Massumi has argued for the autonomization of affect, its ability to resist being contained within any particular body (35). In a related move, Kathleen Stewart identifies "ordinary affects" as "public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but [...] also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of" (2). There is something both free-floating and public about affect and indeed, we can see evidence of that in the passages I have already quoted above. For example, Mrs. Tulliver's fear is not entirely localized within her as an individualized subject. The fear "hover[s]" and then "enter[s]" her, as if the feeling were always floating just outside of her body, waiting for an opportunity to "t[ake] complete possession of her." This is a feeling that is not contained entirely—or perhaps not even primarily—within the interiority of a human subject; rather, it is a feeling that exists in the world, that hovers around subjects, forming—in a sense—a type of atmosphere. Such a "hovering fear" is both a public feeling and an undeniable part of Mrs. Tulliver's intimate interior life. It is both personal and social. Similarly, in Tom's conversation with Bob, we can see here the social character of fear of the flood. Tom's "dread" and Bob's boastful denial of his fear develop as part of a dialogue between them about the level of the Floss. As with the "hovering fear" of Mrs. Tulliver, this is a feeling that does not seem entirely localized within individuals. Indeed, "that dread" becomes its own agent in the final sentence of the passage as it acts as a stimulus on Tom's imagination.

Because of the slipperiness of dread in the novel in relation to the critical debate about the difference between affect and emotion, I follow the lead of Sianne Ngai in shifting focus away from this distinction in favor of reading, instead, any given emotional or affective experience as an "unusually knotted or condensed 'interpretations of predicaments'—that is, signs that not only render visible different registers of problem (formal, ideological, sociohistorical) but conjoin these problems in a distinctive manner" (3). Ngai wants to read feelings, whether called emotions or affects, as signs—signs of complex entanglements and contradictions that produce difficulty for a given consciousness. In this way, Ngai relies on the affective theories of Silvan Tomkins. Ngai follows Tomkins in reading affect as a marker of investment, as a something that is worthy of "care or concern" (Ngai 54). Affect is an orienting feeling—it is what invests aspects of the world with significance. It is "how the world itself comes to matter" (77). Affect clusters around situations or problems that are demand attention. It orients us toward a problem.

What then is the predicament that provokes dread in the novel? While both Mrs. Tulliver and Tom experience some version of this type of dread in the novel, it is Maggie for whom dread becomes a defining affect. And it is not only dread of the climactic flood. Throughout the novel, Maggie recognizes what the future holds for her, especially in her romantic entanglements. She imagines the possibility of Tom's accidental discovery of her secret relationship with Philip Wakem, though "this was not one of the most likely events; but it was the scene that most completely symbolized her inward dread" (439). Similarly, when she stays overnight on the boat

alone with Stephen, she awakes the next morning and recognizes what the future will hold for her: “Stephen was not by her now: she was alone with her own memory and her own dread. The irrevocable wrong that must blot her life had been committed [...]. Her life with Stephen could have no sacredness: she must for ever sink and wander vaguely” (596-97). What these affective experiences share, beyond their ties to Maggie’s romantic attachments, is an orientation toward certain futures: a future in which her relationship with Philip is discovered and a future in which her indiscretion with Stephen renders her an outcast from village life. She dreads these futures. As indeed, even more clearly, she dreads the final, climactic flood.

Maggie's predicament here, the predicament that demands concern through the affect of dread, is one that I refer to as anticipatory belatedness. Anticipatory belatedness is the recognition that an event in the future will come to pass—an event that one does not want to come to pass—but that it is (always?) already too late to prevent or avoid it. It is a predicament that relies on the irrevocability of the future, a sense that the future has already been determined (whether by one's own actions or by the very nature of the world in which we live) and that one has no other option than to continue forward into that despised future. Such a predicament, I would suggest, can be thought in both formal and sociohistorical registers. Formally, anticipatory belatedness is part of the structure of any narrative with a fixed ending, such as the catastrophe narratives that I have been discussing throughout this chapter. However, there is also a sociohistorical (and, indeed, ideological) aspect here. Feeling

anticipatory belatedness would seem to depend upon belonging to a society that understands itself using such narratives.

If dread is the marker of a predicament, what response does it demand? If, as an affect, dread orients us toward the world, what kind of orientation does it provide? How does one respond to anticipatory belatedness? Maggie's response to the final flood reveals something about the structure of dread in a catastrophic world. Considering Maggie's capacity for dread, it is fitting that the novel's final, fatal flood is focalized through her. This is the scene that the novel's characters have foreseen from the beginning. This is the future that they have been waiting for, the future that they have dreaded. In this moment, there is fear, of course, but also a type of acceptance, a lack of surprise. As Maggie kneels in prayer, late at night in her second floor room, she "felt a startling sensation of sudden cold about her knees and feet: it was water flowing under her. She started up—the stream was flowing under the door that led into the passage. She was not bewildered for an instant—she knew it was the flood!" (649). The definite article attached to "flood" here makes clear, as I have argued throughout, that the end of the novel was never in doubt—even for the characters themselves. And indeed, we can see here a component of acceptance, of expectation fulfilled, in Maggie's lack of bewilderment over the stream flowing under her bedroom door. And her immediate response to the final flood is to participate in the narrative—to move forward toward the end that is clearly approaching. She wakes the rest of the household and then commandeers a rowboat and floats off over the submerged fields. Her actions drive the narrative forward.

But there is also a resistance here. The narrative impulse that seemed to drive Maggie forward stalls as she finds herself in the boat: "In the first moments Maggie felt nothing, thought of nothing [...]. The whole thing had been so rapid—so dreamlike—that the threads of ordinary association were broken: she sank down on the seat clutching the oar mechanically, and for a long while had no distinct conception of her position" (650-51). This moment, in contrast to Maggie's actions just moments before, threatens to shut down the narrative entirely. Maggie has passed beyond thought and feeling and her connection to the world ("the threads of ordinary association") has been "broken." She continues to float this way for "a long while," only experiencing certain basic sensations: "the cessation of the rain, and a perception that the darkness was divided by the faintest light" (651). Maggie has, at this point, withdrawn from the narrative; she is no longer oriented toward the future. Indeed, she is barely engaged with the world at all, except for a few basic perceptions. In this moment, dread has collapsed from a type of fatalism that accepts the future as it approaches into an affective orientation that refuses to recognize the future at all. This is a dilatory, atemporal space of limited sensation or perception, and as such, it offers a resistance to the future that is trying to arrive.

Maggie does not remain in this space, however. She comes back to full consciousness and paddles into the current of the river, bringing herself into the danger that will result in her death. As she floats into these more dangerous waters, she can see "floating masses [...] that might dash against her boat as she passed, and cause her to perish too soon" (653). The "too soon" in this sentence marks Maggie's

return to an acceptance of the inevitability of the end of her own narrative. Her concern is not about perishing, but only about perishing before she can locate and rescue her family. And yet, there remains a hint of refusal in Maggie's acceptance: "For the first time Maggie's heart began to beat in an agony of dread. She sat helpless—dimly conscious that she was being floated along—more intensely conscious of the anticipated clash" (653). In this moment of dread, there is a dialectic between anticipation and withdrawal. She is oriented toward the future of "the anticipated clash." And yet, there remains an echo here of her earlier withdrawal from the world: she remains only "dimly conscious" of the fact that she is "being floated along." There is a tension here between a temporal and an atemporal orientation. There is an orientation toward the future and recognition of its approach. At the same time, there is a denial to engage with that very future—a refusal of narrativity.

This is dread as an affect that both accepts and refuses temporal orientation. It is a simultaneous recognition of the anticipated future and an impulse toward the interruption or postponement of that very future. It is an orientation toward what seems too close and an attempt to delay it as it threatens to appear. It both relies on and interrupts the narrative impulse. To see oneself as part of a narrative is necessary for dread. But it also contains a desire to short-circuit or escape that narrative. It is an affect of both engagement and resistance. As such, I read it as an affective analogue or translation of the ethical question that is to preoccupy Eliot throughout her novelistic oeuvre. As she notes in her novel *Romola*: "the question where the duty of obedience ends, and the duty of resistance begins, could in no case be an easy one"

(457). If this question summarizes the ethical dilemma of Eliot's moral universe, the affect of dread, in *The Mill on the Floss*, offers a way of applying this question to the issue of narrative. Dread is a simultaneous obedience and resistance to narrative; as such, it is an affective condensation of Eliot's broader concerns throughout the rest of her work.

Such an invocation of Eliot's ethical project calls attention to the way in which life in a catastrophist world in *The Mill on the Floss* is an almost entirely individual experience. Although, in an important sense, all of the characters in the novel and all of the residents of St. Ogg's live in a catastrophist narrative, only a handful recognize this. Several of the Tullivers accept that their future holds catastrophe, but the town—as I noted earlier—prefers amnesia and agnosis. The Tullivers live among " men [who have] los[t] their belief in volcanoes and earthquakes," even as natural catastrophe looms once again.

It is Maggie's difference from the people who surround her that marks her as a recognizable type of heroine in Eliot. Just as Dorothea Brooke (in *Middlemarch*) and Romola struggle with ethical quandaries that are apparent to few of the others who surround them, Maggie wrestles with a relationship to a future that seems invisible to most everyone else. Eliot's focus on Maggie here seems both necessary and inadequate. As an elaboration of life in a catastrophist world, the experience of Maggie's interiority is key to understanding the often very personal compressions of temporality and irruptions of affect that are the consequences of such a world. And yet, if it is a catastrophist world, there must be other people living in it, as well. What

of the ways that catastrophe narrative impinges on social experience, the community, and public life? Is there a collective experience of catastrophe that can be explored?

Such questions are beyond Eliot's project in *The Mill on the Floss*. While her later novels show an increasing interest in the dialectic between social and individual experience, none of them take place in the same sort of catastrophist world as *The Mill on the Floss*. For this reason, I turn elsewhere in order to explore the dimension of the social and its relation to disaster. The question of the divergence between Maggie and the rest of St. Ogg's in recognition of the catastrophic future would seem to evoke an unavoidable pre-echo of our own contemporary experiences of the discourses around anthropogenic climate change. In our own time, what is at stake is less the scientific question of what the future holds and more the political question of the broad recognition and acceptance of that future. I will consider our current experiences in our own catastrophist world as part of my Epilogue. More immediately, in my next chapter, I will explore questions of the intrusion of disaster into public life in the form of railway disasters and the associated forms of collective trauma. In that chapter, I will trace the experience of life as part of a community that is defined by a shared vulnerability to disaster.

CHAPTER 2

"My Railway Collision":

Disaster, Trauma, and the Creation of a Railway Public

"There is even a wild legend about George Stephenson's debut. He pulled the first mobile boiler out of the shed. The wheels turned, and the inventor followed his creation down the evening street. But after just a few strokes, the locomotive sprang forward, even faster, Stephenson helplessly behind. From the other end of the street there now came a troop of revelers who had been detained by beer; young men and women, the village preacher among them. Toward them the monster now ran, hissing past in a shape that no one on earth had ever seen, coal-black, throwing sparks, with supernatural velocity. Even worse than the way the old books portrayed the devil; nothing was missing, but there was something new. A half mile further the street made a bend right along a wall; into this the locomotive now rammed and exploded with great violence.

The next day, it is said, three of the pedestrians fell into a high fever, and the preacher went mad. [...] In the preacher's madness we see how one of the greatest revolutions in technology looked before one got used to it and lost the demonism behind it. Only an accident occasionally brings it to mind again: the crash of the collision, the bang of explosions, the screams of shattered people—in short, an ensemble that has no civilized timetable" (124-25).
—Ernst Bloch, "The First Locomotive," *Traces*.

The railroad was a potent symbol of the nineteenth century, both for contemporaries and for later historians and critics. The discourse of the railway was—and remains—a discourse about progress, power, modernity. By the second railway boom in England in the mid-1840s, the locomotive had become "an instrument of power, speed, noise, fire, iron, smoke—[...] a testament to the will of man rising over natural obstacles" (Leo Marx 191). And indeed, there were no apparent obstacles to the will of the railroads. In E. J. Hobsbawm's words, the railroads were "revolutionary" (*Industry* 88). They were monumental, "their sheer size and scale [...] dwarf[ing] the most gigantic public works of the past" (Hobsbawm

Industry 89). The railways did not, he continues, even seem to inhabit the same temporality as the rest of the country: "they appeared to be several generations ahead of the rest of the economy, and indeed 'railway' became a sort of synonym for ultra-modernity in the 1840s, as 'atomic' was to be after the Second World War" (*Industry* 89).

If the grandeur of the railroads—their scale, organization, and technological advancement—was a sign of modernity, it was a sign with an obvious affective valence. For John Stuart Mill, the railroads must be read as creating an invidious comparison between the new and the old. As Mill notes, "the mere visible fruits of scientific progress in a wealthy society, the mechanical improvements, the steam-engines, the railroads, carry the feeling of admiration for modern and disrespect for ancient times, down even to the wholly uneducated classes" (43). In Mill's quotation, the railroads transport more than passengers and goods; they "carry" meaning and affect. One—even one who is from the "uneducated classes"—only has to look at the railroads to find herself caught up in the spirit of modernity. This is the discourse of the "technological sublime" (Leo Marx 195).

But, of course, the sublime is about more than admiration; it is also about fear. In its sublimity, the railway did not only signify grandeur, but also—perhaps necessarily—manifold destruction. The countryside—and by extension, the English pastoral idea—was one sphere that was obviously under threat. In *Middlemarch*, George Eliot's portrait of country life in the 1830s, characters fear "the ruin of this country-side by railroads" (344). They expect the iron rails to cut through fields,

bringing "harm to the land" and a dreaded taste of metropolitan "Lunnon [London]" to rural life (343). In this novel, the arrival of railway surveyors is greeted with suspicion and the suggestion that "the least [the surveyors] pretended was that they were going to cut Lowick Parish into sixes and sevens" (343). The countryside would, at "least," be chopped to pieces—and worse might well be on the horizon.

But it is not only the fields of Lowick that are in danger from the railways; it is also, in a sense, space itself—as well as time. As Leo Marx notes, "no stock phrase in the entire lexicon of progress appears more often than the 'annihilation of space and time'" (194). And indeed, as Christopher Keep points out, variations on this phrase were a cliché of railway writing from the early 1830s and beyond (137). With the consequences of railway transport clearly in mind, Karl Marx would rely on a variation on this phrase more than twenty years later in the *Grundrisse* when he noted capital's attempt at the "annihilation of space by time" (539). There is both violence and hyperbole in this phrase and its variations. An incremental (though significant) improvement in the speed of transport of people and goods has been re-imagined as a type of ruptural event in which basic ontological categories (space, time) are destroyed entirely.

This conceptualization—of the railway as a destructive, ruptural event—creates a metaphorical link between railways and disaster. Such a discourse is developed explicitly in a well-known passage from Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1846-48). In the novel, Dickens figures the construction of the railway in Camden Town in the 1830s as a type of natural disaster:

> The first shock of a great earthquake had, just at that period, rent the whole neighbourhood to its centre. Traces of its course were visible on every side. Houses were knocked down; streets broken through and stopped; deep pits and trenches dug in the ground; enormous heaps of earth and clay thrown up; buildings that were undermined and shaking, propped by great beams of wood. [...] There were a hundred thousand shapes and substances of incompleteness, wildly mingled out of their places, upside down, burrowing in the earth, aspiring in the air, mouldering in the water, and unintelligible as any dream. Hot springs and fiery eruptions, the usual attendants upon earthquakes, lent their contributions of confusion to the scene. Boiling water hissed and heaved within dilapidated walls; whence, also, the glare and roar of flames came issuing forth; and mounds of ashes blocked up rights of way, and wholly changed the law and custom of the neighbourhood.
>
> In short, the yet unfinished and unopened Railroad was in progress; and, from the very core of all this dire disorder, trailed smoothly away, upon its mighty course of civilisation and improvement. (68)

This passage conjures up a hellscape, a nightmare of "disorder" that is both natural and unnatural. The earthquake metaphor does a significant amount of this work. Ruined houses, broken streets, hot springs, jets of flame: this is what an earthquake looks like. It is worth noting that this novel was published only three years after a catastrophic earthquake in the one-time British colony of Guadeloupe, a disaster that received its share of coverage in *The Times* over the course of several months in

1843. We can expect that many readers of Dickens would have remembered reading the horror stories from that very disaster just a few years earlier.

And yet, this metaphor of railway as earthquake breaks down. It is not the inclusion of human interventions, the "boiling water" or "trenches dug in the ground," that breaks the framing of the scene as a natural disaster. It is also the explicit recognition that this destruction has come about through *intention*. The creation of the railroad and the concomitant destruction of this neighborhood in Camden Town is not an unmaking of the world, but a *remaking* of the world. There may be a hint of irony in the final lines of this passage, in the narrator's invocation of "civilisation and improvement," but it is only a hint. Though, as we shall see in this chapter, Dickens's attitudes towards the railways were much more complicated than his critics often alleged (including Ruskin's famous charge that Dickens was "a leader of the steam-whistle party *par excellence*" [*Letters* 7]), he did not reject the possibility of progress through technology. As Philip Collins notes, Dickens "was more modernist, more steam-whistleish, than some of his intellectual contemporaries" (654). Despite the apparent reliance on the metaphor of an earthquake, this passage suggests the inadequacy of this very metaphor. The coming of the railway is not pure, senseless, inexplicable destruction. Rather, if the Railroad is a disaster, it is—perhaps—a new kind of disaster.

In thinking about disaster and the Railroad, I want to step back for a moment from metaphor, from the linkages of the railway to social dissolution, the slicing up of the pastoral landscape, and the annihilation of familiar ontological categories. Rather,

I want to think about a very literal possibility that railways brought vividly to the nineteenth-century imagination: the threat of violent death. The interaction of velocity, iron/steel, and human bodies raises irresistible questions about vulnerability and mortality. These were questions that Dickens and other Victorian novelists were eager to explore: the villainous Carker in *Dombey and Son* stumbles onto the tracks and is hit by a train, "struck [...] limb from limb" (823). Just a few years later, in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*, Mr. Brown suffers the same fate (though Mrs. Gaskell is less explicit about the bloody outcome). And the vulnerability of human bodies to the Railroad is not limited to such singular deaths; with potentially hundreds of passengers on any given train, railway death becomes scalable. The threat from the Railroad is not only violent death, but *mass* death. With the arrival of the Railroad comes something new and frightening: the "technological accident" (Schivelbusch 162), the *catastrophe ferroviaire*, the railway disaster.

I recognize the danger of ascribing too much novelty to a source of mass death in a society that experienced occasional outbreaks of cholera (a threat that I discuss in detail in Chapter 3), not to mention frequent factory fires, shipwrecks, and mine explosions. And yet, railway disasters were a significant preoccupation of the nineteenth-century imagination. In this chapter, I suggest that the railway disaster, though it may have paled in comparison to the devastation of cholera and while it may have produced body counts on par with many industrial accidents of the period, became a new, discrete, and widely dreaded category of mass fatality.

This is a chapter, then, about railway disaster. I am interested in the discourses—medical, journalistic, literary—that developed around such disasters in the nineteenth century and the ways that these discourses became entangled. My overarching concern here is with how the nineteenth-century imagination made sense of railway disasters, how they became part of a collective cultural imaginary. I examine how railway disasters became a shared cultural experience, part of the experience of everyday life in the nineteenth century. What were the consequences of such a disastrous shared experience? How did such disasters become—or fail to become—assimilated into everyday life? While a number of critics, including, most importantly, Wolfgang Schivelbusch, have traced the profound cultural shifts that accompanied the arrival of the railroads, the question of railroad accidents and their broader cultural perturbations has been notably under-examined. This chapter, then, is located at the intersection of a number of discourses: literary, historical, and theoretical. I read works of fiction by Dickens, by Robert Louis Stevenson and Lloyd Osbourne, and by Émile Zola in conversation with both nineteenth-century journalism and recent theoretical approaches to trauma. My primary theoretical commitment in this chapter is to the discourse of trauma theory, although my use of it will depart from some of its more orthodox formulations. In using trauma as a way of approaching railway disaster, I follow the example of most modern historians and critics who have written about such disasters. Indeed, this focus is almost irresistible, considering that the modern discourse on trauma originated as a way of making sense of railway accidents.

Railway Disaster and Trauma

Modern critics turn to trauma as a way of conceiving of the possibility of psychic, rather than physical, injury. In doing so, they follow many of their nineteenth-century forebears, who struggled to make sense of the anecdotal reports of "accident shock, i.e., a traumatization of the victim without discernible physical injury" that accompanied the very first railway accidents, including reports of apparent traumatic responses to the 1842 Meudon catastrophe (Schivelbusch 137). However, the discourse of traumatic injury did not become fully developed until the passage of liability laws in 1864 that held "railway companies [...] legally liable for their passengers' safety and health" (Schivelbusch 134). The shortcoming of such laws, however, was that they only provided compensation for *physical* injuries. As Schivelbusch notes, "those victims who suffered damage without a pathologically demonstrable cause created—in the period between 1865 and 1885—a legal and medical problem whose solution in the courts depended on the medical profession" (135). It was the interaction, then, of legal exigency and increasing medical professionalization that created the first systematic discourse on trauma.

Because of my reliance on trauma discourse in this chapter, it will be worthwhile to trace in some detail the genealogy of this discourse in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. In his 1867 book, *Railway and Other Injuries of the Nervous System*, John Erich Erichsen recognized the "disproportion" in many cases of railway injury between apparent physical damage and actual symptoms (72). At this point in time, Erichsen's explanation for railway shock relied on "concussion of the

spine"; he noted that "not only do symptoms of concussion of the spine [...] often develop themselves after what are apparently slight injuries, but frequently when there is no sign whatever of external injury" (72). Strangely enough, as Erichsen pointed out, the symptoms often did not even appear until later: "when [the victim] reaches his home, the effects of the injury that he has sustained begin to manifest themselves. A revulsion of feeling takes place. He bursts into tears, becomes unusually talkative, and is excited. He cannot sleep, or, if he does, he wakes up suddenly with a vague sense of alarm" (74). The rest of Erichsen's book is devoted to a discussion of potential physical injuries that could account for such puzzling symptoms and their latency of appearance. At this point, he—as well as many of his contemporaries—was unwilling to abandon physical injury as causal explanation.

Within a decade, the possibility of psychic causation had become a reasonable hypothesis. In 1875, Erichsen released a new treatise, *On Concussion of the Spine, Nervous Shock, and Other Obscure Injuries of the Nervous System in the their Clinical and Medico-Legal Aspects*, considerably revising his earlier theories of railway shock. Notably, in the title of this work, "nervous shock" has joined "concussion of the spine" as a type of injury. Erichsen now offered the possibility of a distinction between the psychic and the physiological. He notes that "it is important to observe that a serious accident may give rise to two distinct forms of nervous shock, which may be sufficiently severe to occasion complete unconsciousness. The first is mental or moral, and the second purely physical. These forms of 'shock' may be developed separately, or they may co-exist" (194).

Very quickly, once Erichsen admitted the possibility of "mental or moral" shock, the focus of physicians on shock moved almost entirely to such psychic explanations. By 1883, Herbert Page was focused entirely on such psychological disturbance, arguing that fear alone could produce the symptoms that Erichsen identified with nervous shock:

> Medical literature abounds with cases where the gravest disturbances of function, and even death or the annihilation of function, have been produced by fright and fright alone.
>
> It is this same element of fear which in railway collisions has so large a share—in many cases the only share—in inducing immediate collapse, and in giving rise to those after-symptoms which may be almost as serious as, and are certainly far more troublesome than, those which we meet with shortly after the accident has occurred. [...] The incidents indeed of almost every railway collision are quite sufficient—even if no body injury be inflicted—to produce a very serious effect upon the mind, and to be the means of bringing about a state or collapse from fright, and from fright only. (147)

Page's revision of Erichsen places the symptoms of railway shock firmly into the domain of the psychic. Page goes even further: he links such symptoms to the experience of fright. Indeed, it is "fright and fright alone" which is the cause of railway trauma. At this point, as Schivelbusch notes, the discourse of psychological trauma lacks only a clear name—a requirement that Hermann Oppenheim would quickly fulfill by coining the phrase "traumatic neurosis" (Shivelbusch 145).

It was Freud who did the most to elaborate the concept of traumatic neurosis. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1922), Freud notes that, although the construct was developed in response to "railway disasters," it was only in the wake of World War I that the fully psychic nature of traumatic neurosis was established (10). He reports that "the terrible war which has just ended gave rise to a great number of illnesses of this kind, but it at least put an end to the temptation to attribute the cause of the disorder to organic lesions of the nervous system brought about by mechanical force" (10). Freud places the symptoms of traumatic neurosis on the same continuum as those of hysteria, although he admits that such neuroses will require an explanation beyond traditional hysteria. He is blunt: "no complete explanation has yet been reached either of war neuroses or of the traumatic neuroses of peace" (10). To the end of providing such a complete explanation, Freud returns to the observations of Page and earlier physicians about the role of fright in traumatic neurosis. His innovation here is to make a distinction between different forms of fear:

> 'Fright', 'fear', and 'anxiety' are improperly used as synonymous expressions; they are in fact capable of clear distinction in their relation to danger. 'Anxiety' describes a particular state of expecting the danger or preparing for it, even though it may be an unknown one. 'Fear' requires a definite object of which to be afraid. 'Fright', however, is the name we give to the state a person gets into when he has run into danger without being prepared for it; it emphasizes the factor of surprise. I do not believe anxiety can produce a

> traumatic neurosis. There is something about anxiety that protects its subject against fright and so against fright-neurosis. (11)

For Freud, the cause of traumatic neurosis is not—in itself—fear; rather, it is the experience of fear without preparation for it (what Freud calls "fright"). As he develops this distinction further, Freud begins to speak of a type of psychological "protective shield against stimuli" (35). Anxiety (an expectation of a fearsome event) raises this shield, whereas fright bypasses this shield entirely, entering a mind that is completely unprepared for it.

Most recent theorists of trauma rely explicitly on this Freudian schema. Cathy Caruth's reading of Freud focuses on the idea of trauma as "unclaimed experience" (10). Caruth develops the consequences of Freud's suggestion that the traumatic event, experienced in a state of fright, creates a breach in the psyche's protective shield. The traumatic event, in this explanation, bypasses that shield and enters the unprepared psyche. For Caruth, the key to Freud's elaboration of traumatic neurosis is the suggestion that the traumatic event inhabits the psyche in such a way as to prevent its understanding. She argues that "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4; emphasis in original). Trauma, then, is an experience that has not been, and indeed cannot be, "claimed" by the conscious subject—it cannot be assimilated because in a very real sense it was not experienced in the first place. Or,

more accurately, because the mind was unprepared for the traumatic event (an event that caused a fright), the event was experienced as a threat only belatedly:

> It is not simply [...] the literal threatening of bodily life, but the fact that the threat is recognized as such by the mind *one moment too late*. The shock of the mind's relation to the threat of death is thus not the direct experience of the threat, but precisely the *missing* of this experience, the fact that, not being experienced *in time*, it has not yet been fully known. [...] For consciousness then, the act of survival, as the experience of trauma, is the repeated confrontation with the necessity and impossibility of grasping the threat to one's life. It is because the mind cannot confront the possibility of its death directly that survival becomes for the human being, paradoxically, an endless testimony to the impossibility of living. (62; emphases in original)

Caruth's argument here relies on two impossibilities: temporal and existential. The temporal impossibility is the experience of something in time that one has missed. The surprise of the traumatic event prevents its full comprehension at the moment that it is actually occurring and it is impossible to reclaim that temporal experience. But this is not the sole impossibility here. Caruth is also arguing for a broader, existential impossibility: the impossibility of grasping the experience of one's own death.

But while such approaches to trauma are useful, they seem inadequate for thinking about trauma as something more than a purely individual experience of a singular catastrophic event. This model is productive for making sense of a discrete

trauma that happens to an individual, for example, Dickens's response to his own railway accident. However, it is less clear how Freud and Caruth can enable an understanding of broader cultural trauma. How does the individual, discrete traumatic event become something diffuse, widespread, shared? In order to ask these questions, a different discourse of trauma is necessary.

My understanding of shared trauma in this chapter depends on Ann Cvetkovich's reading of trauma and its creation of publics. Cvetkovich's project is the recognition and delineation of "'trauma cultures'—public cultures that form in and around trauma" (9). For Cvetkovich, traditional ways of understanding trauma serve as a starting point for thinking about trauma as a cultural and public experience. She summarizes her collective orientation toward trauma in a passage that will serve as a touchstone for my own project:

> A PTSD clinical diagnosis defines trauma as an overwhelming event that produces certain kinds of symptoms in the patient. Poststructuralist theory defines it as an event that is unrepresentable. I want to think about trauma as part of the affective language that describes life under capitalism. I'm interested in how shock and injury are made socially meaningful, paradigmatic even, within cultural experience. I want to focus on how traumatic events refract outward to produce all kinds of affective responses and not just clinical symptoms. Moreover, in contrast to the individualist approaches of clinical psychology, I'm concerned with trauma as a collective experience that generates collective responses. I am compelled by historical

> understandings of trauma as a way of describing how we live, and especially how we live affectively. (19)

Cvetkovich here situates her project in the context of previous interventions in the understanding of trauma; however, she does not reject such formulations. Rather, she wants to understand how trauma becomes something more quotidian—how it becomes normalized as part of a capitalist culture. To this end, it is necessary to move beyond an enumeration of the specific clinical symptoms that are traditionally associated with trauma to an understanding of the ways that trauma leaks into everyday affect, how the ripples from a traumatic event propagate throughout a collectivity.

Cvetkovich's own project to normalize trauma as part of cultural life focuses on how trauma interacts with and produces queer cultures—especially for women. Part of this requires a new understanding of what constitutes a traumatic event. Drawing on work in feminist theory, Cvetkovich notes that trauma need not be dependent only on a "catastrophic event" (33). She follows Laura Brown in recognizing the possibility of "insidious" trauma, noting that, for women, simple everyday experiences (for example, regular experiences of sexism) can be traumatizing in a chronic way. Indeed, "more so than distinctions between private and public trauma, those between trauma as everyday and ongoing and trauma as a discrete event may be the most profound consequence of a gendered approach [to understanding trauma]" (33). This concept of "insidious" trauma provides a way for Cvetkovich to consider trauma as it is normalized as part of everyday experience; it

does not rule out, however, that such everyday trauma also relies on and can be reinforced by or intensified by "punctual events" (32).

It is this kind of culture that I want to delineate, a culture in which catastrophic events—railway disasters—blur the boundary between everyday occurrence and catastrophic event. Relying on Cvetkovich's concept of "trauma cultures," I trace the ways these disasters became part of the culture, producing affective consequences far beyond their immediate temporal and physical point of occurrence. This leads to a picture of a specific kind of nineteenth-century public, a public created by the chronic trauma of railway disaster: a disaster public.

In order to read the archive of the nineteenth-century disaster public, it is necessary to consider how different words are deployed in this period to talk about railway accidents. Railroad events of the period were variously described as "accidents," "collisions," "disasters," and "catastrophes." However, there are some subtle differences in usage between these terms. Perhaps the most common term used to describe a negative unexpected occurrence on the railway is the word "accident." Although such a term may seem to suggest a general class of contingent events, there is a way in which—in this period—the word "accident" became particularly identified with the railways. As W. A. Dinsdale notes, in the mid-nineteenth century the term "accident insurance" was created to apply specifically "to insurance against personal accidents while travelling by the railways" (1). In the texts I discuss, this term tends to be used as a general descriptor that can encompass a range of different railway mishaps. It is also the term that is used frequently in sources that are concerned with

engineering, such as Felix Tourneux's *Encyclopédie des chemins de fer et des machines à vapeur* (1844) or Robert Ritchie's *Railways: Their Rise, Progress, and Construction* (1846). Newspapers and other journalistic sources of the period often used the word accident, as well as the word collision. Collision was a term, like accident, that could be deployed to describe railway events in which there was no loss of life, for example, George Walter Thornbury's "My Railway Collision," which recounts an event in which nobody dies.

In contrast, terms such as "disaster" or "catastrophe," in their nineteenth-century usage, seem to require a body count. There is a clear sense in which these terms are used to signify a greater scale of destruction, a scene of mass death. Even so, terms such as "accident" and "collision" are still used interchangeably with these terms to describe major railway mishaps. For example, *The Times*' report on the Sonning Cutting event on December 25, 1841, describes it as both an "accident" and a "catastrophe" ("Frightful Accident" 5). Similarly, the account in *La Presse* of the Meudon event on 10 *mai* 1842 describes the crash in succeeding sentences as an "*accident*" and as a "*désastre*" ("*Événement affreux*" 1). In considering the usage of these terms, it seems that—in general—the nineteenth-century imagination considered catastrophes and disasters to be a subset of accidents and collisions—a subset that tends to require greater casualty.

In this chapter, I follow the somewhat standard practice in my nineteenth-century archive of generally using the words "disaster" and "catastrophe" to refer to accidents that produced multiple deaths. However, I do so with the recognition that

the imposition of this logic on the archive does not capture its full complexities. Consider the case of the first railway casualty, William Huskisson, who was struck down at the dedication of the Liverpool & Manchester Railway in 1830 (by a locomotive driven by none other than George Stephenson, the engineer who built that railway). Most sources, including Stephenson's biographer and *The Times*, referred to Huskisson's death as an accident. And yet, in his recounting of the event, Charles Francis Adams refers to the accident as a "catastrophe" (6). Although the difference between catastrophe and accident can often be used to denote a difference in scale, words that connote appalling horror (such as "catastrophe") tend to cluster, in this period, around any type of railway accident, even accidents without significant loss of life. Such a slippage—that a single death can be catastrophe—further demonstrates the traumatic power of the railways in the nineteenth century. The aura of the disastrous hovered over the railroads.

Intersubjective Trauma: Dickens and "The Signal Man"

In 1865, almost two decades after Carker's gory death on the tracks and Camden Town's railway "earthquake" in *Dombey and Son*, Dickens himself was the involved in a serious railway accident. Traveling to Dover with his mistress Ellen Ternan and her mother, Dickens's train derailed on a viaduct over a riverbed near Staplehurst. A work crew replacing wooden baulks on the viaduct had temporarily removed the rails, after a foreman had misread that day's railway timetable (Nock 15-16). The foreman's mistake was compounded by the misplacement of an emergency flagman, who was much too close to the bridge for the conductor to stop the train

when signaled (Hill 149). The accident caused a number of the carriages—including the first-class carriage containing Dickens and the Ternans—to go over the side of the bridge; several carriages came to rest in the riverbed, while Dickens's carriage hung from the track above (Hill 150). A total of ten passengers were killed and forty injured.

Dickens recounted the crash four days later in a letter to Thomas Kitton. He describes the moment of the crash: "suddenly we were off the rail, and beating the ground as the car of a half-emptied balloon might" (*Letters* 581; sic for the apparent transposition of "as" and "of"). He describes the position of the carriage: "It was caught upon the turn by some of the ruin of the bridge and hung suspended and balanced in an apparently impossible manner" (581). And yet, what is remarkable in this retelling is Dickens's extreme self-possession. If we are to believe his report, his first words after the crash to his traveling companions were "We can't help ourselves, but we can be quiet and composed. Pray don't cry out" (581). He then describes how he climbed out the window of the carriage, found two railway guards, and convinced them to help him rescue the Ternans. Then, after his carriage was empty, Dickens prepared to help the other passengers: "I got into the carriage again for my brandy flask, took off my travelling hat for a basin, climbed down the brickwork, and filled my hat with water" (582).

The scene into which Dickens rushed to help was a horrible one and, in the rest of the letter, he describes his experiences in some detail. In a remarkable passage, Dickens recounts that

> Suddenly I came upon a staggering man covered with blood (I think he must have been flung clean out of his carriage), with such a frightful rent cut across his skull that I couldn't bear to look at him. I poured some water over his face and gave him some drink, then gave him some brandy, and laid him down on the grass, and he said, "I am gone," and died afterwards. Then I stumbled over a lady lying on her back against a little pollard-tree, with the blood streaming over her face (which was lead colour) in a number of distinct little streams from the head. I asked her if she could swallow a little brandy and she just nodded, and I gave her some and left her for somebody else. The next time I passed her she was dead. [...] No imagination can conceive the ruin of the carriages, or the extraordinary weights under which the people were lying, or the complications into which they were twisted up among iron and wood, and mud and water. (*Letters* 582)

We can sense the depth of the impression this scene made on Dickens. There is the breathless syntax of the second sentence ("I poured some water..."), with its accretion of clauses linked by "and," building to the man's death. There is the terrible clarity of Dickens's memory of the "distinct little streams" of blood from the woman's head. Despite these moments of clarity, Dickens is clearly overwhelmed here, as he asserts that "no imagination" could picture the scene. And indeed, in subsequent letters, we find Dickens recalling more and more of the scene, as if he had been unable to take it all in and report on it all at once. Several days later, Dickens recounts how "a labourer

and I got Mr. Dickenson out of a most extraordinary heap of dark ruins, in which he was jammed upside down. He was bleeding at the eyes, ears, nose, and mouth" (583).

Dickens himself was unharmed—at least at first. However, as Schivelbusch and other critics have noted, Dickens afterward developed an almost textbook case of railway shock (Schivelbusch 138-39). Jill L. Matus summarizes Dickens's symptomatology:

> He was greatly shaken and lost his voice for two weeks [...]. He suffered repeatedly from what he called 'the shake,' and, when he later traveled by train, he was in the grip of persistent illusion that the carriage was down on the left side. Even a year later, he noted that he had sudden vague rushes of terror [...]. At such times, his son and daughter reported, he was unaware of the presence of others and seemed to be in a kind of trance. His son Henry recalled that he got into a state of panic at the slightest jolt; Mamie attested that her father's nerves were never really the same again [...]. [413-14]

Such a constellation of symptoms would have fit perfectly into the schemata of railway shock proposed by Erichsen or Page. And it changed his life. As biographer Peter Ackroyd suggests, Dickens's psyche was continually haunted by what he had seen that day: "the great conceiving power of Charles Dickens was thus turned into a medium for recurrent and conscious nightmare; once he had seen the characters of Smollett and Fielding around him, now he saw only the dead and the dying" (964). It is perhaps little surprise, then, that "as his son said, Dickens 'may be said never to

have altogether recovered' and that he actually died on the fifth anniversary of the Staplehurst disaster" (Ackroyd 964).

Although it is undoubtedly fascinating that the most popular English author of the nineteenth century developed traumatic neurosis from a railway crash, this is not the primary reason why I have described the Staplehurst disaster and Dickens's psychosomatic reaction to it in such detail. I am less interested in Dickens's specific experiences as a traumatized individual and more interested in the ways that his personal traumatic experiences spread into the broader culture. I want to trace how his trauma, to use Cvetkovich's phrase, "refract[s] outward," producing effects beyond his immediate traumatic symptoms. To do so is to read Dickens's traumatic neurosis doubly: as personal, individual experience and as a public site that produces effects through his engagement with public life. The question then is how Dickens's trauma became a cultural trauma.

A trauma can become public to the extent that it can *spread*, such that a traumatic experience need not be confined solely to the individual psyche of the subject who initially experiences it. Tellingly, Dickens himself provides for that very possibility in his ghost story "The Signal Man." Published in the 1866 Christmas issue of Dickens's journal *All the Year Round*, the story of a railway accident and its supernatural precursors raises obvious questions about the relation between the story and the Staplehurst disaster that took place only a year earlier. From a perspective of Freudian trauma, this story looks like one more compulsive repetition of Dickens's accident. Matus reads this story in exactly this way, arguing for "an integral

connection between Dickens's experience of accident trauma and this ghost story" (414). Matus's reading of the story focuses on Dickens's own experience of trauma and how it plays out in the narrative, how the story "uncannily apprehends the heart of traumatic experience" (414). But while Matus's reading of traumatic narrative in the story is convincing and perceptive, it is necessary to shift emphasis from the individual experience of trauma in the story to the way that experience becomes socialized.

Compared to other Dickens ghost stories, the plot of "The Signal Man" is both streamlined and complex. An unnamed narrator comes across a railway signalman in a deep cutting before the mouth of a tunnel. Despite his unease with the eerie atmosphere of the cutting and the occasionally unaccountable behavior of the signalman, the narrator visits him on three successive nights. During the second visit, the signalman explains that his strange behavior is due to fear. He has been visited on three occasions by a "spectre" (237); on the first two occasions, the visit of the spectre has preceded an accident on the railway line, including, a "memorable accident" with many casualties (236). Recently the spectre had reappeared and the signalman fears the disaster this may presage. The narrator is concerned for the sanity of the signalman and, after much rumination, returns on the third evening to insist that he seek medical help. However, when the narrator returns to the cutting the third time, he finds that the signalman has been struck down that very morning by a train emerging from the tunnel.

As Matus notes, symptoms of trauma—repetition, haunting, disruption of linear temporality—structure the narrative (427-28). Both the eponymous character and the narrator reenact certain troubling experiences again and again. The narrator repeats his first uncanny visit to the "barbarous, depressing, and forbidding" cutting (232); the signalman, through the repeated appearance of the spectre, is forced to repeat as well the disasters and accidents that have occurred on his line. The signalman is haunted—both by the previous disasters, but also from the future, by a spectre that acts out his own future death.[1] This story allows Dickens to explore the "disjunction in subjectivity" that results from traumatic experience (Matus 428). The characters in this story live simultaneously in the past, the present, and the future, all while failing to recognize that they are doing so. They are traumatized subjects. But there are also intersubjective aspects to the experience of trauma in this story.

The first intersubjective component to trauma in this story is the way that trauma can be passed on from one subject to another. It is the signalman who makes a traumatized subject of the narrator. The narrator's first visit to the cutting leads him to repeat the visit the next night (and the next). But why? Why does he return to such an unpleasant place? In thinking back to his first meeting the signalman, the narrator raises the possibility that something happened to him in the act of entering the cutting: "I have speculated since, whether there may have been infection in my mind" (232). I want to suggest that what infected the narrator, at first, was sensation—a

[1] It would be instructive to read "The Signal Man" in conjunction with *The Mill on the Floss*. As my reading of Eliot's novel in the previous chapter makes clear, *The Mill on the Floss* is also a type of ghost story—one in which disaster haunts the present from its place in the future.

traumatic sensation transmitted by the signalman himself. On the second night, as the signalman recounts his ghost story of his visitation by the spectre and the subsequent calamities, the tale produces somatic effects in the narrator—effects that are reminiscent of traumatic symptoms. He experiences the phantom touch of "a frozen finger tracing out my spine" (236). And, perhaps evoking Dickens's own shaking in the wake of the Staplehurst accident, the signalman's reference to the "memorable accident" causes the narrator to experience a type of uncontrollable shaking: "a disagreeable shudder crept over me" (236).

But the somatic experience is not limited to symptoms of trauma; the narrator also begins to feel the presence of a traumatic event itself. As he leaves the cutting the first night, the narrator reports that "I walked by the side of the down Line of rails (with a very disagreeable sensation of a train coming behind me)" (235). It is telling that this experience is phrased in the language of sensation, not of fear. It is not that the narrator merely fears that a train could be approaching him from behind, poised to run him down; rather, he reports actually *feeling* that train to be there. In this feeling, the narrator is also anticipating the experience that the signalman himself will have two mornings later as he is struck in the back by a train.

Not coincidentally, it is on that day that the narrator most clearly finds himself reliving the traumatic experience of the signalman. Before his death, during the third visitation of the spectre, the signalman describes the gesture that the spectre seems to be making:

'The left arm is across the face, and the right arm is waved,—violently waved. This way.'

I followed his actions with my eyes, and it was the action of an arm gesticulating, with the utmost passion and vehemence, 'For God's sake, clear the way!' (235).

But, on the third day, as the narrator approaches the cutting, it is he who experiences the signalman's vision: "I cannot describe the thrill that seized upon me, when, close at the mouth of the tunnel, I saw the appearance of a man, with his left sleeve across his eyes, passionately waving his right arm" (240). That the narrator's "nameless horror" at this sight passes quickly as he realizes that the figure he sees is truly a man and not a spectre should not obscure that, for a moment, he was in the same position as the signalman. In that moment, he repeats the signalman's vision of the spectre; his infection by the signalman's trauma has become complete.

But there is more than contagion at work here. The experience of the narrator does not only suggest that it is possible to transmit the experience of trauma from one subject to another. Rather, Dickens's story suggests something more complicated: the possibility that trauma can be intersubjective, that it can be distributed across multiple subjects—and perhaps that it can be experienced by a public. The uncanny *frisson* at the end of the story relies on just such a possibility. As the narrator and the railroad employees attempt to make sense of the signalman's death, the revelation that explains the events of the story depends on temporal disruption and the entanglement of subjectivities. The narrator learns that the gesturing spectre was a premonition of

the engine driver, who would make the exact same gesture to the signalman before running him down. As the engineer explains, "I put this arm before my eyes not to see, and I waved this arm to the last; but it was no use" (241). But more troubling are the words of warning that the engineer reports calling out to the signalman: "Below there! Look out! Look out! For God's sake, clear the way!" (241). As the narrator notes in the final words of the story, and with a not entirely convincing attempt toward nonchalance:

> Without prolonging the narrative to dwell on any one of its curious circumstances more than on any other, I may, in closing it, point out the coincidence that the warning of the engine-driver included, not only the words which the unfortunate signal-man had repeated to me as haunting him, but also the words which I myself—not he—had attached, and that only in my own mind, to the gesticulation he had imitated. (241)

Despite the narrator's assertions to the contrary, his final words do focus on "one of [the narrative's] curious circumstances more than on any other." The final revelation of this ghost story is not about the ghost. Rather, it is the discovery that the warning of the engine-drive contained both exclamations that had previously haunted the signalman ("Look out! Look out!" and "Below there!") as well as an unvoiced thought that the narrator identifies as his own ("For God's sake, clear the way!"). Such a disclosure has led several critics to speculate on the ontological status of the narrator himself. David Greenman notes that the story may "leave us with the feeling that the narrator may be a ghost" (46). But it is possible to set aside such a gothic

possibility in favor of pursuing a more intersubjective one. What does it mean that three men who are only loosely connected to each other could share the same response to a traumatic event? We can read this moment in the story as an evocation of the public nature of trauma—as an acknowledgement that traumatic experience does not remain localized within the psyche of its primary victim or victims but rather can become distributed across a public. The accident that kills the signalman, while it does not remain localized at one point in time (hence the premonitions and prefigurations), also cannot be contained within the experience of those who were immediately present (the signalman and the engine driver). It becomes, instead, through the figure of the narrator, a public trauma.

Although George Eliot's realist project precludes direct appeals to the supernatural, the public trauma of railway disaster also haunts *Middlemarch*. I use the verb "haunts" as a way of thinking about how Eliot's narrative gestures toward a fear of railway disaster without speaking the fear directly. In one sense, the haunting in this novel relies on a temporal disjunction: the setting of *Middlemarch* is the 1830s, while the novel itself was written in the early 1870s. To the novelist, the age of railway disaster (inaugurated by the catastrophe at Meudon in 1842) would be accessible and urgent, haunting from the future any discussion of the railways in 1830s. In another sense, the lack of sustained presence of the railways and their effects in the novel is a consequence of Eliot's larger novelistic project. As Terry Eagleton has argued, Eliot's narrative is consciously distant from history: "[t]he

Reform Bill, the railways, cholera, machine-breaking: these 'real' historical forces do no more than impinge on the novel's margins" (120).

But the "histor[y]" of the railways that appears on the "margins" of the novel suggests an anxiety about the railways and the possibilities for disaster. As Jessie Givner notes, references to the 1830 railway death of William Huskisson are "compulsively repeated" in *Middlemarch* (223). Givner reads these repetitions as evidence of *Middlemarch*'s inability (and unwillingness) to fully distance itself from industrial history and technological progress. However, we can also read the repetition as a sign of the trauma that followed the specific event, linking Huskisson's individual death to a broader, more diffuse concern about the danger of railways.

The narrator of *Middlemarch* reports that the question of the building of the railways in Lowick Parish was an "exciting [...] topic," one for which "those who held the most decided views on the subject were women and landholders" (342). The concern of landholders is, unsurprisingly, the question of what the railway would do to their land and how much money they would receive in recompense. Women, in contrast, are focused almost entirely on safety. The narrator notes that "[w]omen both old and young regarded travelling by steam as presumptuous and dangerous" (342). The danger of the railways is not, however, solely confined to humans or to passengers: "'The cows will all cast their calves, brother,' said Mrs Waule, in a tone of deep melancholy, 'if the railway comes across the Near Close; and I shouldn't wonder at the mare too, if she was in foal" (342). And while Mrs. Waule is also concerned about her "widow's property" is in danger, it is not entirely clear that the threat of the

railways to land will not also be generalized to bodies. As she describes a settlement that her brother received after ceding his land to a mining operation, she notes that the payment "wasn't for railways to blow you to pieces right and left" (342). The threat here, even if it is primarily a threat to property, is figured as a threat to bodily integrity.

Even though reaction to the railways and their effects is consigned to the margins of Eliot's novel, we can still read in *Middlemarch* a hint of concern about the potential for violence. The evocations of Huskisson and the expressed fears of the Lowick parishioners (however ill-founded or ridiculous) signal a collective or public fear about the vulnerability of human (and animal) bodies to the new technology. In this novel, such a fear creates a collective—the residents of Lowick, especially the women, who are bound together in their trepidation. It is this shared trepidation that will coalesce in the coming decades into a very public trauma.

In both Dickens's story and Eliot's novel, I trace the incipience of an experience of collective trauma. But the public created by the shared trauma of railway disasters is, not surprisingly, more broad than we see in Dickens's story and Eliot's novel. Rather, the traumatic effects of railway disaster spread far beyond those who were directly implicated in these disasters. As in "The Signal Man," the experience of railway trauma did not stay localized within the circle its immediate victims (and those who were present as witnesses). Similarly, the scale of the danger from the railways met or exceeded the expectations we see in Lowick Parish in the 1830s. Indeed, the effects of railway trauma spread throughout the nineteenth-century

popular imagination, creating a public that can be defined—in a sense—as traumatized.

The Railway Public, Circulating Trauma, and Affect

But who is this public? Why should railway disaster produce a broad public? One way to begin thinking about these questions is to consider the how vulnerability to railway disaster was distributed within nineteenth-century society. Sources of mass death, as I noted earlier, were not uncommon in this period; however, what made railway disasters particularly troubling was their potential to affect almost anyone. After its invention, railway travel quickly became a common part of everyday life. As David Newsome notes, more than 33 million railway journeys were taken in 1845; by 1849, the number was over 60 million (30). Perhaps even more importantly, members of all social classes were potentially vulnerable to railway accident. The Sonning Cutting railway accident of 1841—the first major railway disaster in England—killed 8 passengers who were, in the words of *The Times*, "chiefly of the poorer class" ("Frightful Accident" 5). However, railway travelers in first class carriages were no less vulnerable. Less than six months after Sonning Cutting, a train full of guests who had celebrated Louis-Philippe's birthday at Versailles, including the explorer Jules Dumont d'Urville, were killed in the *catastrophe ferroviaire de Meudon* (the first railway disaster in France) [Adams 59-60]. In contrast then to mine explosions, factory fires and industrial mishaps, and even outbreaks of cholera (which, as Victorian reformers noted at the time, tended to be associated with the slums [O'Connor 28]), railways disasters were a source of mass death that could affect

almost anyone regardless of class position. The railways offered a democratization of disaster.[2]

Railways, then, created a large vulnerable public, but railway disasters also captured the imagination of that public because they were *spectacular*. Schivelbusch suggests that railway disasters rank "among the most spectacular events of the nineteenth century" (125). He uses the adjective "spectacular" here in the sense of an occurrence that grabs attention, an event that is dramatic or sensational. And there is no question that railway disasters in the nineteenth century were that. However, there is an additional dimension of meaning here. When I speak of the spectacular nature of railway disaster, I am relying on the work of Guy Debord in *La société du spectacle*. For Debord, "*[l]e spectacle n'est pas un ensemble d'images, mais un rapport social entre des personnes, médiatisé par des images*" ("the spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relationship between persons, mediated by images"; 4; my translation). For Debord, the spectacle is not merely a sensational event, or even merely the representation of that event. Rather, there is a way that the spectacle is a

[2] And yet, as even rudimentary contemporary attempts at statistical analysis made clear, the risk of death in railway collision to any one person during the nineteenth century was miniscule. Charles Francis Adams calculated the risks of railway injury and death in Great Britain for the years 1870-77 and found the risk of death to be around 1 in 15 million (the risk of injury was much greater, however, at approximately 1 in every 500,000) [253-54]. Even if we assume that the railway death and injury rates were much higher in the earlier years of the century (before safety improvements to signaling systems and brakes), these numbers still seem to suggest a low risk of death or injury—much likely less than the risk of death from infectious disease. Between 1861 and 1870, around 3.5 million people in England and Wales died from disease (including cancers) [Woods 350-51]. The population of England and Wales in 1861 was approximately 20.2 million people (*Census* 5). Based on these numbers alone, it is clear that mortality risk from disease would have been multiple orders of magnitude greater than any risk associated with the railways.

relationship to an event that has been mediated. It is a representation that has been mediatized—propagated through the press or other modes of the distribution.

We can take the disaster at Meudon, with the deaths of approximately two hundred French revelers, as a case study here.[3] Pierre Mercier has focused on how the disaster became part of the national consciousness in France. On the night of the collision, Mercier reports, as the word of the disaster spread throughout the capital, thousands of protesters converged on the offices of *la Compagnie Rive Gauche*, the company that operated the train (153). However, it was not until the next day, as the press began to publish accounts of the disaster, that the story became a significant public experience (154-57).

When the report of that disaster was published in *La Presse* two days later, it appeared on the front page. It is a remarkably detailed account. It breathlessly describes the pileup of the engine and trailing carriages; however, that was just the beginning of the horror:

> *Le feu a pris avec une rapidité prodigieuse en dévorant d'abord les caisses en bois des locomotives, qui lui ont fourni un élément très actif. La flamme a envahi les voitures fermées contenant les voyageurs, et dont l'une a été consumée, à ce qu'il paraît, dans l'espace de dix minutes. Tous les voyageurs qui étaient dans cette voiture ont péri, et les corps ont été consumée, au point qu'ils étaient tout à fait méconnaissables* [...]. ("*Événement affreux*" 1)

[3] Contemporary accounts estimated the number of casualties to be more than fifty, however, recent research has suggested the number of dead was more likely closer to two hundred (Mercier 153).

> The fire started with a prodigious rapidity and devoured first the wooden cases of the locomotives, which provided a very active element. The flames invaded closed cars containing travelers, and one was consumed, it seems, within ten minutes. All the travelers who were in the carriage were killed and their bodies burned to the point that they were all unrecognizable. (my translation)

The flames would go on to consume at least six carriages, all with their passengers locked inside "according to the practice of such dreadful establishments" ("Dreadful Railroad Accident" 7). Across the Channel, *The Times* summarized the spectacle as "one of the most frightful events that has occurred in modern times" ("Dreadful Railroad Accident" 7).

Accounts like these in the popular press helped to create a specific public reaction to the disaster. As Mercier notes, "*[p]arler des tués, des blessés, raconter les scènes horribles de l'incendie, cela ne peut qu'aviver l'émotion*" ("speaking of the killed and injured, recounting the horrible scenes of the fire, can only have intensified the emotion [of the public]; 155; my translation). Mercier has collected contemporary reports of the public emotion in the wake of the disaster. His various sources speak "*des clameurs universelles*," an "*immense éboulement moral*," and suggest that the disaster "*remplit la France et le monde de terreur*" ("universal clamors"; "immense collapse in morale"; "filled France and the world with terror"; 157-58; my translation). The representations of the disaster in the press created a national mood, producing a collective affective response to the disaster. And, as Mercier notes, this mood affected train travel in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, significantly

reducing the number of passengers on the Versailles line in the subsequent months (170).[4]

It was more than newspaper accounts that produced a spectacular relation between individuals and the Meudon disaster, however. As Mercier details, the public response included essays, poems, and songs. The description of the disaster scene even captured the imagination of artists, such as A. Provost. In his painting *Catastrophe ferroviaire entre Versailles et Bellevue le 8 mai 1842,* he presents the scene as a staged spectacle (Figure 4).

Fig. 4. A. Provost, *Catastrophe ferroviaire entre Versailles et Bellevue le 8 mai 1842*, Château de Sceaux, Musée de l'Ile-de-France.

[4] However, as Mercier notes, the effect of the Meudon disaster on railway traffic was relatively short lived. By August of that year, the passenger statistics had rebounded significantly (170).

In the painting, the ruins of the train have become a gigantic pyre—taller than the surrounding sides of the cutting. The dead, dying, and unconscious are being carried to the foreground. Behind them, small groups of men attempt to rescue passengers from the bonfire and from the locked carriages. At the top of the pyre, a woman in an impossibly luminous white dress raises her arms in supplication. On both sides of the cutting, groups of spectators have gathered; their presence is compelled by the disaster. They have become an audience. And indeed, their presence as an audience implicates us as viewers of the painting. We too are watching the catastrophe unfold, although—in our case—from an even more privileged position: the disaster is centered in our field of vision, unobscured by smoke, such that we can see all aspects of the scene (the praying woman, the burning carriages, the dying and injured who are laid out immediately in the foreground). The painting creates a kinship in spectacle between the viewer in the gallery and the spectators who crowd around the sides of the painting. We are all spectators here—equally helpless to do anything other than to watch and, potentially, equally vulnerable.

There can be a pleasure in such helplessness. Paintings or illustrations of railway disasters—after Meudon—were far from the only ways that such disasters could be experienced by the broader public. Nicholas Daly has written about the "railway terror" dramas that populated London stages in the late 1860s. According to Daly, such dramas presented "a spectacle more familiar to us now as a stock simulation in early cinema: someone is tied to, or lies unconscious on, the railway tracks while a train approaches at full speed" (10). In such dramas, Daly notes, the

crisis was usually averted, although in some plays, characters would indeed be struck by the train (11). Even without such a theatrical death, such melodramas were remarkably popular. Daly identifies at least five London theaters in the autumn of 1868 that were showing some variation on the "railway scene" (10). These theaters allowed for the public to be made, literally, into an audience for railway disaster (or a barely-averted version of it).

Unsurprisingly, the greatest contributor to the creation of an audience for railway disaster is the medium that we have already encountered in the discussion of the catastrophe at Meudon: the popular press. As we have seen, nineteenth-century newspapers covered railway disasters in some detail.[5] But it is not only *The Times* and other daily newspapers that covered such disasters; in fact, the most coverage of railways for a number of years in Victorian England may have come directly from Dickens himself. As Ewald Mengel notes, "for about twenty years, and at more or less regular intervals, from 1850-1870 [...] *Household Words* and *All The Year Round*, under Dickens's editorship, printed a great number of reports, essays, satires, anecdotes, poems and tales on the subject of the railway" (3). As Mengel elaborates, these railway pieces had a widespread diversity of topics and tones; they are neither uniformly critical nor laudatory (5). A significant number of these pieces were focused, especially, on railway accidents and safety—including, most famously, "My Railway Collision" (1860), "Need Railway Traveler's Be Smashed?" (1852), and

[5] Although perhaps not quite as extensively as they could have. In his piece entitled "My Railway Collision," George Walter Thornbury suggests conspiratorially that "it was the universal custom in collisions to hush up everything as much and as soon as possible" (179).

"The Signal Man" (1866). These journals were published once a week and their reach was extensive: circulation of some numbers of *All The Year Round*, for example, may have reached 300,000 (Mengel 5). But in addition to these weekly journals, Dickens, from 1850-1855, also published a monthly supplement entitled *The Household Narrative of Current Events*. The supplement, during this period, served to collect—alongside other news—all reports of significant railway accidents. The index to the 1851 volume alone lists more than 24 accounts of railway accidents published that year. This means that a significant amount of the media conversation around railway accidents during the mid-Victorian period can be traced back to Dickens's publications. Even before his own accident, Dickens was a cultural site that produced a discourse of railway disaster.

There are a number of ways railway disasters became spectacles that—often explicitly—created an audience. The Provost painting, the "railway scene" melodramas of the 1860s, and the accounts of disasters in the popular press were all ways of representing disaster. What they all have in common is that they *commodify* railway disasters. The representational labor involved here produces accounts of railway disasters that can then be sold to the public as commodities. However, it is not solely the disasters that are being commodified; in many cases, it is also the trauma associated with those disasters. "The Signal Man," the experience of the spectator at the London theater who "shudder[s] at the narrowly averted collision of metal and flesh" (Daly 10), as well as Thornbury's account of his railway collision and its effects on him: all of these accounts produce a commodity out of the

experience of trauma. Even in cases of what is often experienced by victims as an inexpressible trauma (recall Dickens's assertion that "[n]o imagination can conceive [...]" of the devastation at Staplehurst), the experience is still converted into language. Trauma—at least some version of it—can be represented and can become commodified. Furthermore, when we speak specifically of the accounts of disasters that occur in the popular press, it is essential to recognize that these are commodified disasters that (as commodities do) *circulate*. These stories of railway disasters and associated trauma do not remain localized in one place: one gallery or one (or five) theaters. Rather, the experience of railway trauma—mediated through newspapers and magazines—becomes available to all members of what we might call, borrowing a phrase from "Need Railway Travelers Be Smashed?", the "railway public" (219).

And who is the "railway public"? In thinking about this question, it is useful to recall Benedict Anderson's work on "imagined communities." For Anderson, "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact [...] are imagined" (6).[6] By this, Anderson means that what links the members of any given community (and, in Anderson's work, the primary imagined community is the nation) is not firsthand acquaintance or even knowledge about each other. Rather, the community is based on imagined ties between the members, whether in terms of geography,

[6] In this argument, Anderson is relying on a sociological tradition that dates back to the nineteenth century, a distinction introduced by Ferdinand Tönnies in *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* between "community" and "society." Tönnies's concern is how to theorize the relationship between community (*Gemeinschaft*) as an "organic" and immediate experience of life and society (*Gesellschaft*) as an "imaginary" structure (37). Anderson's concern is similar, although he purposefully refers to imaginary social relations as "communities" as well.

kinship, shared experience, religion, temporal coincidence, etc. One of the significant ways of creating such an imagined community, Anderson notes, following G. W. F. Hegel, is the daily newspaper. The reading of the newspaper produces a sense of community through a solitary activity: "The significance of this mass ceremony [...] is paradoxical. It is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others" (Anderson 35). Following this argument, the tens of thousands of readers of Dickens's weekly journals or the many more readers of *The Times* can be considered—and, as Anderson suggests, would have considered themselves—part of a specific community. Or, to be more specific, such readers would have found themselves implicated, through the act of reading the newspapers, in any number of imagined communities—not simply at the level of the nation-state or social class, but also linked by other imagined commonalities. What this suggests, then, is that there was, in the nineteenth century—overlapping with innumerable other types of imagined communities (including those of nation states)—a community of anxious and vulnerable railway travelers constructed into such a community, at least in part, by newspapers. This is the "railway public" that is referred to in "Need Railway Travelers Be Smashed?"

The creation of such a community is, however, not necessarily a simple process. Thornbury's "My Railway Collision" explores the multiple relationships between commodified trauma and the creation of a traumatized public. Ralph Harrington has remarked that railway disasters in the period were not

"individualized," meaning that they were not an event that happened to just one person (par. 3). In this way, the possessive "my" in Thornbury's title becomes, in a way, ironic. As he makes clear, his collision does not belong only to him. At the most basic level, Thornbury reports on explicit attempts by members of a railway public to create a sense of such a public as defined by a shared vulnerability. He ends his narrative by noting that "Now I know why fretful men thrust the reeking Times [sic] into your hands just as you leave a station, and with fore-fingers jammed on a small paragraph about a collision, ask you angrily if 'it isn't shameful?'" (180). This vignette suggests that travelers were presented with a conscious opportunity to consider themselves as part of a community of vulnerability—and, from Thornbury's description of the inquiries of these "fretful men," of indignation.

Yet, even so, Thornbury notes that it took his own direct experience with a railway collision ("now I know") in order to understand why men would make such direct appeals outside railway stations. In fact, Thornbury's position vis-à-vis the circulation of railway trauma is rather more complicated than that of direct experience of a collision or that which occurs at the tips of the fore-fingers of fretful men. Rather, it seems to rely on a version of Brown's "insidious trauma" that Cvetkovich relies on in her work. Interestingly, Thornbury begins his narrative of his railway collision not at the station or with his boarding of the train; rather, his narrative begins with his morning wake up call from his laundress. He describes his morning ritual: "Thump went my boots. In a moment I was splashing in my bath like a tame merman learning swimming. But something troubled me, and hung about me like a damp shirt. What

was it? IT WAS A PRESENTIMENT" (176; emphasis in original). He goes on to describe the "foreboding of evil" that he felt on that morning and his difficulty in understanding its source. As he sits at the breakfast table, he peruses *The Times* and comes across, "at the bottom of the third column of the fifth page: 'TERRIBLE RAILWAY ACCIDENT'" (176). He mentions, then, a few of the details—in shorthand form—before exclaiming "Who cares to read [sic] railway accidents?" (176). And yet, as he describes his cab ride to the railway station, he cannot shake his earlier presentiment: "Still that mosquito of evil. Still that demon gnat flying over my nerves" (177). The answer comes to him:

> I have it! It was that railway accident I was reading, falling upon that previous presentiment; it was that which, finding some unguarded loophole of my nerves, had got in, disagreed with me, and done the mischief. Strange that I, who have skimmed over hundreds of railway accidents, to get quickly to the end and see the total deaths, should be moved by the loss of three men on the Eastern Counties! (177)

There are several important aspects to this passage. For one thing, it gives a sense of how common articles about railways accidents were in the Victorian press. What is more interesting, however, is Thornbury's description of being influenced by such articles—including the one from that very morning. Such a process, he suggests, is both unpredictable: why is he "moved" by the deaths of three men when, he seems to imply, he has read of much worse? His understanding of this unpredictability relies on two slightly different explanations. He suggests that it is not merely the article

about the railway accident that had such pernicious effects on his peace of mind. Rather, it was an interaction between the story and a preexisting affective state; the story did its damage by "falling upon that previous presentiment." However, the *Times* story did not come to occupy his mind in a straightforward manner, even though he was planning to take the train that day. His original report of skimming the article seems to offer little clue that he had taken the story of the accident seriously. Yet, he suggests that the story has managed to find an indirect route into his consciousness; it found "some unguarded loophole of [his] nerves." Thornbury here is offering an argument for the insidiousness with which commodified railway trauma can interact with the nerves of the railway public. Such an interaction is necessarily unpredictable, dependent on various other affective states, and can occur indirectly. Especially in this last possibility, I suggest that we should hear an intriguing pre-echo of Freud, specifically his suggestion that traumatic neurosis is attributable to a "breach made in the protective shield against stimuli" (35).

Although Freud remains useful in this discussion, I am not proposing the development of full-blown trauma neurosis in members of the railway public who read newspaper coverage of railway accidents. For this reason, it is worth differentiating here beyond Thornbury's affect in this narrative and Freud's idea of traumatic neurosis. Although Thornbury does not use the term "anxiety" to describe his state of mind the morning before the accident, such a designation would seem to capture the experience he reports. We have already encountered in Freud a discussion of anxiety in the context of traumatic neurosis. Freud has suggested that anxiety can

serve as a type of protection against such neuroses, offering, as it were, a type of preparation for an unexpected traumatic event. However, in the case of the railway public, we are dealing with anxiety not as a precursor to trauma (and not as one that can prevent the development of neuroses), but rather as a *consequence* of trauma. There is a long history in the trauma literature of this type of consequential anxiety, dating back to Erichsen's identification of a "vague sense of alarm" as a symptom that recurs after railway collisions (74). Similarly, it is clear from Dickens's symptomatology after Staplehurst that the experience of what we might call severe anxiety recurred for him regularly. But we can read a version of the same anxiety—anxiety caused by exposure to trauma—in a much broader community than just survivors of railway collisions. Thornbury remarks on this prevalence of railway anxiety when he notes that "when a train slackens speed or stops, a dozen staring anxious heads emerge like tortoises from carriage windows" (180).

Schivelbusch offers a slightly different reading of such anxiety. He suggests that such anxieties, while common in the early years of railway travel, became less common as such travel became more common. He notes that "the ever-present fear of a potential disaster remained, however, only until the railroad had become a part of normal everyday life" (130). However, such ever-present fears did not disappear entirely. Schivelbusch goes on to suggest that "any sudden interruption of [the railroad's] normal functioning [...] immediately reawakened the memory of the forgotten danger and potential violence: the repressed material returned with a vengeance" (130). The language of repression here is explicitly Freudian, and may

seem unnecessarily strong when compared to Thornbury's pre-Freudian attempt at depth psychology. But it seems clear from both Thornbury's narrative and Schivelbusch's historical analysis that the railway public in this period would have experienced a type of low-grade anxiety that is also, with some consistency, disavowed. Such affect is *public* affect—affect that is experienced by and that, perhaps, comes to define a specific collective or community. Through the consideration of public affect, our understanding of railway trauma can move away from the specific clinical case studies of Freud toward a model of trauma communities inspired by Cvetkovich.

The Wrong Box*, Trauma, and the Death Drive*

In my reading of Thornbury's narrative, I offer an outline of a way of thinking about and potentially tracing the entanglements between individual trauma and public experience, focusing on the circulation of trauma within specific communities. Yet, there is a much more detailed—and complicated—exploration of railway disaster and its traumatic effects in Robert Louis Stevenson and Lloyd Osbourne's late Victorian novel, *The Wrong Box* (1889). This novel can be read as an allegory of the commodification and circulation of railway disaster. As such, it reveals the complexities and contradictions in the ways that railway disaster as traumatic experience became part of the broader cultural imaginary during this time.

The Wrong Box is a strange work, one that has received little critical attention. Most biographies and critical examinations of Stevenson barely mention it at all. It seems likely that the ambiguous question of its authorship is at least partially

responsible for its obscurity. The novel was something of a collaboration between Stevenson and his teenage stepson Lloyd Osbourne. Although biographers disagree over how much work Stevenson actually put into the novel, the consensus is that Osbourne wrote the first draft and that Stevenson joined the project at a later date (Harman 351). The extent to which Stevenson took the collaboration seriously, however, remains in dispute. Claire Harman insists that "Stevenson thought of [the novel] as Lloyd's rather than his own" (373). She argues that Stevenson added his name to the title page primarily as a favor to Osbourne, to ensure that the work would be published. Oliver S. Buckton reads more genuine enthusiasm in Stevenson's collaboration: "as Stevenson's letters reveal, his own creative energies were reanimated by this collaboration with the youthful novice" (41). However, regardless of Stevenson's specific authorial contribution, the novel was savaged by critics—most of whom seemed to blame Stevenson primarily (Maixner 335-36).

The plot of the novel is remarkably complicated; Buckton has called it "no less byzantine than that of a sensation novel" (42). The premise hinges on two brothers, Joseph and Masterman Finsbury, who are the sole remaining survivors of a tontine that they were entered into as children. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a tontine is "a financial scheme by which the subscribers to a loan or common fund receive each an annuity during his life, which increases as their number is diminished by death, till the last survivor enjoys the whole income." In the novel, then, we find a situation such that whichever brother survives the other will receive a significant sum of money. As both brothers are elderly men, their interests in the

tontine are primarily relevant to their heirs: Masterman's son Michael and Joseph's nephews Morris and John (who are also, to make matters more complicated, Joseph's legal guardians). As a successful solicitor, Michael is not urgently interested in the question of the tontine; Morris and John, who are the proprietors of Joseph's failing leather business, desperately need the prize.

The equilibrium in this premise is destabilized by a railway disaster, as Morris, John, and Joseph travel to the coast for a holiday. Uncle Joseph survives the accident, but uses the chaos and confusion to escape from his hated legal guardians and to set off on his own. Morris and John find a badly mutilated corpse that is, coincidentally, wearing the same outfit as their uncle Joseph, and—suspecting that their uncle Masterman is already dead or dying in London—decide to hide what they believe to be Joseph's body until after Masterman's death in order to win the tontine. As part of the plan, Morris and John decide to ship the body back to London in a water barrel—in a wry illustration of Ruskin's concern that the railways would make people into parcels (*Seven Lamps* 166). However, due to the actions of a bored prankster in the baggage car, the barrel containing the corpse is sent to the wrong address. From this point on, the plot focuses on an increasingly desperate chain of recipients, as each unlucky recipient of the foul parcel tries to find another person to pass it along to. The novel offers no resolution to this chain; the corpse never does get buried. At the end of the novel, it is still, apparently, hidden inside a grand piano, being driven through the English countryside on a stolen delivery cart. Even such a

basic outline of the plot should give a sense of the novel, as the *Pall Mall Gazette* notes in a review, as "the grimmest of farces" (Maixner 342).

Buckton's reading of the novel focuses on the circulation of the corpse in the narrative. Taking as a starting point the expression of disgust by contemporary reviewers of Stevenson and Osbourne's novel, Buckton offers a queer reading of the novel in which the corpse becomes a metonym for desire between men, a desire that (to the horror of Victorian book reviewers) could not be buried once and for all (40). Such open-ended circulation of the corpse does not offer any containment for unruly desire. As Buckton notes, "among the most disturbing features of *The Wrong Box* is its power to suggest, without naming them, the presence of unspeakable desires that surface to disrupt the progress of the narrative toward ideological closure" (54). And it is true that, as readers lose track of the corpse in the piano, the narrative remains frustratingly unresolved—at both the formal and ideological level.

But as persuasive as I may find Buckton's reading of the novel, there is something essential is missing. Reading the corpse as a metonym for same-sex desire obscures that this is a novel about *railway disaster*. Admittedly, critics can be forgiven for focusing little on railway disaster in this novel, as the novel itself does not spend much time on it. The description of the disaster itself is brief, although quite horrific. The narrative describes the scene of confusion that precedes the crash: "a sudden jarring of brakes set everybody's teeth on edge, and there was a brutal stoppage. [...] Women were screaming, men were tumbling from the windows on the track, the guard was crying to them to stay where they were" (20). Then, as the train

begins to reverse its direction to avoid a looming head-on collision, "all these various sounds were blotted out in the apocalyptic whistle and the thundering onslaught of the down express" (20). The moment of the crash, however, does not appear in the narrative. At this moment, the narrative switches to Morris's limited and partial perspective: "the actual collision Morris did not hear. Perhaps he fainted" (20). When he comes to, "his head ach[ing] savagely," Morris surveys the horror of the scene:

> all of the near side was heaped with the wreckage of the Bournemouth train; that of the express was mostly hidden by the trees; and just at the turn, under clouds of vomiting steam and piled about with cairns of living coal, lay what remained of the two engines, one upon the other. On the healthy margin of the line were many people running to and fro, and crying aloud as they ran, and many others lying motionless as sleeping tramps.
>
> Morris suddenly drew an inference. 'There has been an accident!' thought he, and was elated at his perspicacity. (20-21)

There are comedic effects in this passage, as the narrative invites us to laugh at Morris's delayed understanding of the situation and of his callow, bourgeois perspective (in which the dead and dying look to him like "sleeping tramps"). But there is also something remarkable about how the passage recognizes that such a disaster is not able to be experienced in its full traumatic intensity. Morris's lapses, his confusion, his partial perspective: these are markers of traumatic experience. In this, the narrative places us in a slightly different position from the newspaper accounts of disaster that we read earlier, from the railway disaster melodramas of the Victorian

stage, and from the position that we occupy in Provost's painting. While we remain an audience here, it is not an audience with full access to the scene; rather, we are being placed in the epistemological and affective position of the victim of trauma himself.

The traumatized perspective on the disaster fades as Morris and John find the corpse of (they believe) their uncle and hatch the plot to salvage their chance at the tontine. As their machinations become increasingly complicated, discussion of the "Browndean catastrophe" fades from the narrative (34). The circulation of their "uncle's" corpse takes over the plot. But as Buckton reads this corpse as a metonym for unspeakable desire, we must also read the corpse as a synecdoche for the trauma of railway disaster. As discussion of the Browndean disaster disappears from the novel, it is replaced by the physical presence of the corpse itself—the corpse that was created in that very disaster. The effect (the corpse) becomes substituted for the cause (the catastrophe). The disaster and its traumatic effects remain the focus of the narrative throughout the novel, embodied synecdochically in the physical presence of the corpse. If we read the corpse in this way, then, the novel becomes a narrative about the circulation of railway disaster and its associated trauma—how such trauma becomes detached from the specific time and place of disaster and moves throughout the culture. *The Wrong Box* becomes an allegory of the circulation of railway trauma.

As the disaster—in the form of the corpse—circulates, we can read its traumatic effects on the recipients. The first recipient of the misaddressed barrel is William Dent Pittman, a timid artist and drawing master. Coincidentally, Pittman is a friend of Michael Finsbury, and the two open the cask together; as the boards of the

cask fall away, "a certain dismal something, swathed in blankets, remained for an instant upright, and then toppled to one side and heavily collapsed before the fire. Even as the thing subsided, an eye-glass tingled to the floor and rolled toward the screaming Pittman" (84). The identification of the corpse as a "something" or a "thing" is, in its way, accurate; however, such vague nouns allow for a slippage of signification. The something here can be the body, but it can also be, more broadly, the disaster that produced the body. The disaster as a thing becomes conflated with the corpse as thing.

Pittman's screaming at this moment is just the beginning of his psychological dissolution: "the little artist could only utter broken and disjointed sounds" (84). The encounter with the corpse reduces Pittman. He is now the "little" artist. But it also places him, momentarily, out of language. He recovers language, but as Michael schemes to dispose of the body, Pittman finds himself overcome with dread. He imagines "what a night is before me with that—horror in my studio!" (89). And so, the morning reveals Pittman as a changed man. Michael finds "the artist sadly altered for the worse—bleached, bloodshot, and chalky—a man upon wires, the tail of his haggard eye still wandering to the closet" (90). Moments later, as the pair prepares to disguise themselves, Pittman's pale apparition undergoes a further alteration as he shaves his beard. This act is yet another blow to Pittman's self, as he finds that "his last claims to manhood had been sacrificed" (93). Hours later, as Michael's scheme to dispose of the body progresses, Pittman finds himself roiled by "thoughts of suicide" (105). As these passages suggest, the undoing of Pittman through traumatic

experience is thorough. He loses language. He becomes a ghostly version of himself. He loses his manhood. He even contemplates non-being.

But Pittman is not the only character affected by the trauma represented by the corpse. His companion in the task of deconstructing the cask, Michael Finsbury, greets the site of the corpse with more equanimity than Pittman, but he is not immune from the effects. He reacts to the discovery of the corpse with a "pale face and bitten lip," and cannot help "shuddering" (84). Although he recovers his mien of composure quickly, we can read traces of the shock in his inappropriate preparations for disposing of the body. Michael's somewhat manic response takes the form of a refusal to engage seriously with Pittman and his concerns. Michael attempts to evade the reality of the situation through a dilatory and irrelevant tour of Trafalgar Square in which he "criticised the statues and gave the artist many curious details (quite new to history) of the lives of the celebrated men they represented" (96) and a long, drunken luncheon at a French restaurant in which Michael consumes "a couple of brandies and sodas" (97) and " a bottle of Heidsieck's dry monopole" (98). By the time he and Pittman begin to execute his scheme, he is too intoxicated to even see straight: "he looked his friend in the face (one eye perhaps a trifle off), and addressed him thickly" (98). Michael's response to the corpse is an almost parodic performance of a "good time": an enactment of an afternoon that is free from anxiety. Such a performance, however, is not convincing—neither to Pittman, nor, ultimately to Michael himself who, despite his apparently carefree drunkenness cannot quite suppress "a show of uneasiness" as they prepare to send an acquaintance on a fool's errand (101).

This acquaintance is Gideon Forsyth, the third victim of the circulating corpse. Michael's plan, such as it is, is to hide the corpse inside a grand piano and to then leave the piano inside Forsyth's apartment while he is away on an errand. Forsyth's "trembling hands" (131) when he encounters the piano are, like Michael's "shuddering," are a echo of the original "shake" produced in the railway accident (125). But Forsyth adds his own variation to the trauma, as the inexplicable appearance of the piano in his sitting room leads him to doubt his sanity: "I am stark-staring mad. [...] My mind has quitted me forever." (132). The discovery of the corpse locked inside, however, leads him to reprise Pittman's sleepless night: a performance that, for Gideon, consists of "antics of agony, [...] fits of flighty resolution, [...] collapses of despair" (134).

Forsyth, for his part, plans to dispose of the corpse by leaving it in an unattended houseboat; however, his plan goes awry when the cart carrying it to the houseboat is hijacked on its journey through the countryside. Like the previous recipients of the corpse, Forsyth—though unintentionally—rids himself of the site of trauma by passing it along to another unsuspecting victim. The circulation of the trauma in the novel cannot be arrested, and the characters recognize that the corpse will continue to produce its effects beyond their circle. The novel ends with speculation about the experience of the man who has stolen the cart carrying the piano. Gideon wonders,"can we do nothing for the man in the cart?"; Michael replies that they can do "nothing but sympathise" (205). The necessity of sympathy for the thief is clear at this moment, as the effects of the encounter with the railway trauma

are all too apparent. Both Pittman and Morris are in the room to provide visual testimony to the need for sympathy. Pittman, as Michael notes, has "never been [him]self anyway since [he] lost that beard" (179). Morris, who put the corpse into circulation in the first place, appears "a man ten years older than he who had left Bournemouth eight days before, his face ploughed full of anxious wrinkles, his dark hair liberally grizzled at the temples" (201). The railway disaster and its circulation in the form of the un-buriable corpse have produced and, we are led to believe, will continue to produce a trail of traumatic experiences: physical reenactments of the experience of the disaster itself (terror, shaking), forced performances of blithe irresponsibility, and challenges to sanity and masculinity. These are experiences that in some cases, the narrative suggests, leave permanent traces on their victims.

These are not the sole affective responses to railway trauma and its circulation that we can see in the novel. Returning to Michael's reaction to the corpse, we can recall his somewhat unconvincing attempts to dispel or disguise his anxiety through a performance of abandon and good cheer. This performance is a marker of the extent to which Michael has been traumatized by the appearance of the corpse; it is a denial of trauma that cannot quite produce its desired effect. However, there is something about this performance that does seem entirely convincing: his enthusiasm for passing along the corpse and its associated trauma to someone else. After all, as Forsyth's own (moderately) sensible scheme suggests, there is no reason that the corpse could not be disposed of in such a way that it does not traumatize another person. However, once the immediate shock of the corpse in the cask has worn off, Michael "cheerily"

hatches the plan to deposit the body in Forsyth's sitting room. He continues, over Pittman's sensible objections: "I am not going to embark in such a business and have no fun for my money" (89). He defends his complicated scheme to saddle Forsyth with corpse as "a little judicious levity" (89). Of course, it is possible here to step outside the narrative and to hear the creaking of the intricate contraption that is Stevenson and Osbourne's comic plot; burying the corpse in Pittman's back garden (or, for that matter, sliding it into the Thames in the dead of night) brings to a premature conclusion a narrative that clearly wants to prolong its comic effects. It is no accident that the authors explicitly endorse Michael's comment about "judicious levity" in their brief preface to the novel. But setting aside the extradiegetic exigencies of comic plotting, we can read Michael's desire here in relation to the other types of affect that we see in the novel. What does it mean for Michael to seemingly *desire* to spread traumatic experience to others?

Michael's desire here is related to a desire evidenced by his cousin Morris. After losing the corpse, Morris spends the rest of the narrative trying to recover it. Once he finally tracks down Pittman at Waterloo Station (where, coincidentally, Forsyth shows up), Morris demands the return of the body:

> 'Where is the body? This is very strange,' mused Gideon. 'Do you want the body?'
>
> 'Want it?' cried Morris. 'My whole fortune depends upon it! I lost it. Where is it? Take me to it!'

'Oh, you want it, do you? And the other man, Dickson—does he want it?' inquired Gideon.

'Who do you mean by Dickson? Oh, Michael Finsbury! Why, of course he does! He lost it too. If he had it, he'd have won the tontine to-morrow.' (191)

In one sense, the desires expressed here are completely reasonable: Morris needs the body in order to get a death certificate that will allow him to inherit the leather business from his dead uncle (or he needs to continue to hide the body in the hopes of winning the tontine); Michael, as Morris notes, needs the body to win the tontine. At a purely economic level, the desires here are rational. However, there is something unseemly when these desires are attached to a corpse. As Buckton notes, in this passage, "a dangerous desire is at once foregrounded and disavowed by its very interrogation and repetition" (52). Buckton is speaking here about a discourse of homoerotic desire. But there can also be a desire attached to the corpse in the novel that is not necessarily (homo)sexualized. There are other "unspeakable desires" in play here. Morris, having experienced the trauma of the railway disaster, desires to experience it again by reclaiming the corpse. Michael, having experienced the deferred trauma of the original disaster, wants to pass along the same experience to others.

There is clearly a desire for repetition here, a desire to repeat traumatic experience or to propagate the experience. Freud remarked on such an apparent "compulsion to repeat" traumatic experiences in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, noting that such compulsions, "when they act in opposition to the pleasure principle,

give the appearance of some 'daemonic' force at work" (41). The problem here for Freud is how to explain a desire to repeat experiences which provide no pleasure. To account for this, Freud posits "conservative instincts which impel towards repetition" (44). What makes these instincts conservative—as well as what makes them "daemonic"—is that, according to Freud, the state that these instincts lead toward is an inorganic one, a state that precedes organic life. As he notes, "if we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for *internal* reasons—becomes inorganic once again—then we shall be compelled to say that '*the aim of all life is death*'" (45-46, emphases in original). This then is the "'daemonic' force" that drives repetition or traumatic experience, a force that Freud calls the death instinct (or, as it is typically referred to in modern theory, the death drive).

At this level of abstraction (and as the title of Freud's monograph notes), the death instinct serves primarily as a way of accounting for the shortcomings of Freud's own "pleasure principle," by accounting for a class of behaviors that seem to violate Freud's explanatory reliance on the sexual instincts. However, as Freud develops his discussion of the death instinct, its full destructive power becomes recognizable. He begins to read the death instinct as the substrate of aggression—both self-directed and other directed. He recognizes the role of the death instinct in masochism, conceding that it might actually be a kind of "primary masochism"—a masochism that is fundamental to the psyche (66). As for aggression directed towards others, Freud wonders, "is it not plausible to suppose that this sadism is in fact a death instinct which, under the influence of the narcissistic libido, has been forced away from the

ego and has consequently only emerged in relation to the object?" (65). Sadism becomes the death drive deflected—a desire for the destruction of oneself turned toward another.

In the death drive, Freud offers the tool we need to read both Morris and Michael's desire to repeat their experiences with railway trauma. Morris's repetition is, in a sense, masochistic: a repetition of a traumatic experience through which one lived. Michael's repetition, in contrast, relies on a sadistic component: a pleasure in producing traumatic experience in another person. Morris wants to repeat his own traumatic undoing; Michael wants to share his own undoing with others. In *The Wrong Box*, the corpse created by railway disaster serves as an embodiment of the death drive, as a site for the expression of these sadomasochistic desires. It is this sadomasochistic correlate to the circulation of trauma that Stevenson and Osbourne offer to our understanding of how railway trauma becomes public trauma in the nineteenth century. What this novel reveals, beneath the surface of the public discourse about railway disaster, is a perverse discourse of desire for trauma: or, perhaps more hyperbolically, a desire for disaster.

Zola's La Bête humaine, *the Death Drive, and the Disastrous Future*

Such a desire for disaster is explored in *La Bête humaine* (1890) by Émile Zola, as both an individual pathology and a collective affective experience. Zola's preoccupations in his novels, Brian Nelson suggests, are "the demons of modernity" as they are "figured in images of destruction and catastrophe" (7). In *La Bête humaine*, the demon is the railway. The novel's focus on the railways is noteworthy,

Marc Baroli suggests, as it is "*la seule peut-être de notre littérature à vouloir embrasser tous les aspects du chemin de fer*" ("the only [novel], perhaps, in [French] literature that wants to embrace all aspects of the railway"; 215; my translation). To this end, Zola's novel takes place in the world of *les cheminots* themselves, the railway workers. It is, in an important sense, an insider novel. The narrative explores, with prodigious detail, multiple aspects of the railway life: logistics, mechanics, labor. While there are events unrelated to the railway that take place in this milieu, Baroli suggests that the Zola's attention rarely wavered from the railway as the organizing principle of the work: "*le train paraît bien être au centre de l'oeuvre*" ("the train indeed appears to be at the center of the work"; 239; my translation).

La Bête humaine is a violent novel, filled with sexual violence, suicide, and multiple murders. The railway is tied to this violence, both explicitly and implicitly. Explicitly, the railway is depicted as a source of violence or potential violence: characters are run down in tunnels, killed in horrific collisions, and sliced to pieces by the wheels. Even when the violence is not directly linked to the railway, it remains associated with it. None of the violent acts in the novel take place far from a train or railway line, from Robaud's savage beating of his wife Séverine in an apartment above the yards of a railway station in Paris to the murder of Grandmorin in his first-class carriage on the line between Paris and Le Havre. The railway serves as both an agent of violence and a setting for violence. This association becomes part of the structure of the narrative itself. As Rae Beth Gordon notes, "the violent acts in the novel are invariably accompanied by Zola's return to the trains' movements" (155).

The narrative cannot depict violence without a compulsive return to a discussion of trains and their movement throughout the railway network.

However, the railways also serve, in the novel, as a ubiquitous source of potential violence. Zola's novel explores how the anxiety of the railway public is also shared—and in some cases, experienced more strongly—by the railway workers themselves. These workers are also members of a traumatized community, living under a daily threat of violent accident. Railway disaster is never far from the workers' minds. Part of Roubaud's job as the deputy station master at Le Havre is to be informed of all accidents (often through telegraphy), such as the "*question d'un accident arrivé la matin au Havre, et que le télégraphe avait transmis*" ("question of the accident that happened at Havre that morning, and which the telegraph had transmitted"; 26).[7] Even when it is not an established part of their job description, railway workers recount the accident histories for various locations, including the rural crossing on the Le Havre line that will later become the scene for a horrific catastrophe. When the engine-driver Jacques Lantier visits Aunt Phasie (the wife of the crossing keeper), she reassures him that "*voici cinq ans que nous n'avons pas eu d'accident. Autrefois, un homme a été coupé. Nous autres, nous n'avons encore eu qu'une vache, qui a manqué de faire dérailler un train. Ah! la pauvre bête! on a retrouvé les corps ici et la tête là-bas*" ("it's been five years since we had an accident here. Once, a man was cut in two. We, however, have had no more than a cow—which almost derailed a train. Ah, the poor beast! The body was found here and the

[7] All translations of *La Bête humaine* are my own.

head over there"; 36). In the novel, the safe and efficient operation of the railways take place, always, in relation to a barely-submerged history of destruction that remains known primarily to the workers themselves. But even beyond this shadowy counterhistory, as the narrator observes at a station at twilight, the smooth choreography of railway traffic itself seems to evoke the constant threat of disaster in the moment itself: "*c'était un confusion, à cette heure trouble de l'entre chien et loup, et il semblait que tout allait se briser, et tout passait, se frôlait, se dégageait*" ("it was a confusion at that troubled twilight hour, and it seemed that everything would collide, and yet everything passed, and brushed by, and cleared"; 24).

The workers' anxieties are a counterpart to those of the passengers. We can recognize in Zola's novel the same anxieties of the railway public that we have already encountered. For example, when Lantier's engine becomes stuck in snowdrifts during a blizzard on the line, the passengers become restless: "*Des glaces se baissèrent. On criait, on questionnait, toute une confusion, vague encore et grandissante. —Oú sommes-nous?... Pourquoi a-t-on arrêté?... Qu'y a-t-il donc?.... Mon Dieu! est-ce un malheur?*" ("Windows were lowered. People shouted and questioned in vague but growing confusion. —Where are we? Why have we stopped? What is it then? My God, is it a misfortune?"; 150). As the train sits snowed in on the track, the anxiety of the passengers turns into panic: "*C'etait la panique, des cris, des larmes, dans une crise montante d'affolement*" ("There was panic, screams, tears, in a rising attack of terror"; 151). Nor are Lantier and his crew of workers immune to the same terror. As the train becomes completely immobilized, Lantier realizes that it will

be threatened by approaching trains from behind: "*la position devenait critique. Le conducteur d'arrière courut poser les pétards qui devaient protéger le train, en queue; tandis que la mécanicien sifflait éperdument, á coups pressés, le sifflet haletant et lugubre de la détresse*" ("the situation became critical. The conductor ran back to place detonators to protect the train from behind, while the engineer whistled madly, in urgent bursts, the panting and lugubrious whistle of distress"; 153). The significant danger of a collision unnerves both the passengers and the workers. Even the whistle expresses this prevailing affect of fear and helplessness, made even more immediate for Lantier and his colleagues who additionally bear the "*écrasante responsabilité des vies humaines qu'ils traînaient derrière eux*" ("crushing responsibility for the human lives that they dragged behind them"; 146).

While the train is eventually freed from the drifts with no further incident, this episode contributes to the gradually increasing atmosphere of menace that hovers over the railway in the novel. The collision histories and the "near misses" that are recounted again and again in *La Bête humaine* create a narrative expectation of catastrophe. As the novel reiterates the vulnerability of the workers and passengers, the narrative looks toward an increasingly certain railway disaster—a disaster that seems to preoccupy the novel as it progresses.

When the anticipated disaster arrives, it is both spectacular and gruesome. The discretion that is used in the description of the Browndean collision in *The Wrong Box* is absent here. The blank spots of traumatized memory in Stevenson and Osbourne's disaster narrative are replaced with a vivid, detailed account—one that

lingers on multiple aspects of the event. Indeed, the temporal experience of the disaster dilates in the narrative. The narrator notes that "*[c]e furent à peine dix secondes d'un terreur sans fin*" ("it was barely ten seconds of terror without end"; 222). The "*dix secondes*" encompass an eternity ("*sans fin*") of experience. The narrative constructs our space in that scene as another spectator. We join the bystanders—Misard, Cabuche, and Flore—witnessing an almost slow-motion description of the impact and its immediate aftermath:

> *Alors, à vingt mètres d'eux, du bord de la voie où l'épouvante les clouait, Misard et Cabuche les bras en l'air, Flore les yeux béants, virent cette chose effrayante: le train se dresser debout, sept wagons monter les uns sur les autres, puis retomber avec un abominable craquement, en une débâcle informe de débris. Les trois premiers étaient réduits en miettes, les quatre autres ne faisaient plus qu'une montagne, un enchevêtrement des toitures défoncées, de roues brisées, de portières, de chaînes, de tampons, au milieu de morceaux de vitre.* (224-25)
>
> Then, twenty meters from the road and frozen in horror, Misard and Cabuche with their arms in the air, Flore with her eyes gaping, saw the terrifying thing: the train standing upright, seven carriages climbing on top of each other, then falling with a horrible crunch into a confused mass of debris. The first three carriages were blown to pieces; the other four were nothing but a mountain, a muddle of smashed roofs, broken wheels, doors, chains, buffers, and shards of glass.

This moment in the narrative is unique in all of the literature that I have considered in this chapter, in that it provides a representation of exactly what the moment of collision looks like. There is a clear impulse toward the pictorial in this representation, or, more accurately, an impulse toward a series of pictures. The three bystanders are frozen in place in foreground as we watch the train smash into the stone cart. We, with them, see the engine and first three carriages rear into the air. And then, in the final scene in the series, the narrative stages a picture reminiscent of A. Provost's representation of the disaster at Meudon. The spectators and the reader occupy a similar position in this narrative as we do in Provost's painting: we watch from the perspective of a viewer on the side of the action, as the debris of the collision forms a mountain in the center of the frame.

However, after the first picture of the crash, the narrative becomes restless. Its focus begins to range over the entire scene, describing horror after horror. The steam engine lays on its side, spilling steam and smoke onto the ground. There is the grisly death of the horses that were pulling the stone cart into which the train crashed, one horse, "*les deux pieds de devant emportés, perdant également ses entrailles par une déchirure à son ventre*" ("with two front legs missing, also [like the engine] spilling its entrails from a tear in its belly"; 225). There are human casualties as well, and the narrative drifts from victim to victim in the manner of Dickens's recollections of Staplehurst. The narrative pauses for "*une jeune femme dont les jambes pendaient, cassées aux cuisses*" ("a young woman whose legs dangled, broken at the thighs"; 227) and for the man it takes a quarter of an hour to free from the wreckage, "*qui ne*

se plaignait pas, d'une pâleur de linge, disant qu'il n'avait rien, qu'il ne souffrait de rien; et, quand on l'eut sorti, il n'avait plus de jambes, il expira tout de suite" ("who, white as a sheet, did not complain, saying that he had no pain, that he suffered nothing; however, when he was freed, he had no legs and died immediately"; 227). Eventually, after visiting multiple grisly tableau, the narrative provides the summation: "*Il y avait, en somme, quinze morts et trente-deux voyageurs atteints grièvement*" ("There were, in sum, fifteen deaths and thirty-two passengers grievously injured"; 232). Not only is this the most meticulously described railway disaster in the novelistic tradition to this point, it is also the most deadly.

But what makes the railway disaster in *La Bête humaine* particularly important is another new development in comparison to the texts considered in this chapter: this disaster was caused intentionally. It was Flore who led the horse-drawn stone cart into the crossing ahead of the oncoming train, with the intention of killing her cousin Lantier, the engine-driver, and his mistress who was riding in one of the carriages. Stung by Lantier's rejection of her and jealous of his mistress, Flore comes to a resolution:

> *Les tuer, les tuer la première fois qu'ils passeraient, et, pour cela, culbuter le train, traîner une poutre sur la voie, arracher un rail, enfin tout casser, tout engloutir. [...] [Q]uant aux autres, à ce flot continuel de monde, elle n'y songeait seulement pas. Ce n'était personne, est-ce qu'elle les connaissait? Et cet écrasement d'un train, ce sacrifice de tant de vies, devenait l'obsession de chacune de ses heures, l'unique catastrophe, assez large, assez profonde de*

sang et de douleur humaine, pour qu'elle y pût baigner so coeur énorme, gonflé de larmes. (216)

Kill them. Kill them the next time they pass. And to do this: derail the train, drag a beam across the track, pull out a rail—in short, smash everything, engulf everything. [...] As for the others [on the train], the constant stream of people, she didn't think about them at all. They were nobody. Did she even know them? And so this crash of a train, this sacrifice of so many lives, became the obsession of all of her hours—the only catastrophe big enough and deep enough in blood and human suffering for her to bathe her enormous, tear-swollen heart.

It is important to note the ease of the transition in this passage from "*les tuer*" to "*culbuter le train*." To move so quickly from murder to mass murder makes clear the new possibility that railways provide: the ability for an ordinary person, with very little effort, to kill large numbers of people. This is a possibility that depends very much on what Elaine Scarry has called "the difficulty of imagining other people." Scarry suggests that "both philosophic and literary descriptions of such imagining [of others] show the difficulty of picturing other persons in their full weight and solidity" (98). The consequence of such difficulty, Scarry notes, is that it can cause one to treat others as less than real persons, enabling cruelty. We can see such an explicit justification in Flore's thoughts. The hundreds of others on the train are unknown to her; they are merely part of a "*flot continuel*" of faces that she might—at most—glimpse through the windows of a speeding train. She does not spare a thought for

them and, indeed, can barely think of them at all, even after witnessing the horrors after the crash. Even at that point, concern for the other victims of her crime is barely possible for her, as "*elle devait faire un effort pour en retrouver le regret et l'horreur*" ("she had to make an effort to feel regret and horror"; 234).

But beyond Flore's apparent unconcern with collateral damage, her justification of her act suggests an equivalence between an internal psychic impulse and large-scale disaster. Flore imagines a catastrophe large enough to compare to the pain in her heart. In this desire, there is a mapping of psychic distress onto the physical world. However, there is a hyperbolic intention in Flore's desire. The manifestation of distress also contains a demand for the destruction of a world. Flore's desire is not to derail the train, but to "*tout casser, tout engloutir*"—to smash everything, engulf everything. Flore's desire for a world-unmaking disaster here is, perhaps, a calculated and rational product of her desire for vengeance, but it is also more than this. Her will to vengeance is a manifestation of the death drive as a desire for the destruction of the world. It is not enough to kill Lantier and Séverine. And it is not only Flore who has this desire. Railway disaster in Zola's novel figures a type of collective death drive, a shared orientation toward the destruction of the social.

Zola develops this possibility most clearly in the novel's final chapter. After his recovery from the disaster, Lantier has returned as engine-driver on the Le Havre-Paris line. However, this time, he, "*au lieu de son express habituel, eut à conduire un train énorme, dix-huit wagons, absolument bondés de soldats*" ("instead of his usual express, was driving an enormous train—eighteen carriages—completely packed with

soldiers"; 282). The soldiers, bound for the Franco-Prussian War, are drunk and singing patriotic songs. Meanwhile, Lantier and his fireman Pecqueux break into an argument over Pecqueux's wife's attempt to seduce the engine-driver. The two men fight to the death in the cab of the speeding train and both plunge to their deaths beneath the wheels: "*On les retrouva sans tête, sans pieds, deux troncs sanglants qui se serraient encore, comme pour s'étouffer*" ("They were found without head or feet, two bloody trunks that still clasped together, as if to suffocate each other"; 284).

But, because Pecqueux had been overstoking the engine, the train rolls on after their deaths, picking up speed—hurtling toward the capital. It is this driverless train, filled with singing soldiers—"*ces hommes qu'on charriait au massacre*" ("these men being carried along to slaughter"; 285)—that becomes the narrative's focus at the end of the novel. In the final lines, the runaway train continues along the track toward Paris, rushing through stations without stopping:

> *Mais, maintenant, tous les appareils télégraphiques de la ligne tintaient, tous les coeurs battaient, à la nouvelle du train fantôme qu'on venait de voir passer à Rouen et à Sotteville. On tremblait de peur: un express qui se trouvait en avant, allait sûrement être rattrapé. [...] [Le train] terrifia Pont-de-l'Arche, car sa vitesse ne semblait pas se ralentir. De nouveau, disparu, il roulait, il roulait, dans la nuit noire, on ne savait où, là-bas.*
>
> *Qu'importaient les victimes que la machine écrassait en chemin! N'allait-elle pas quand même à l'avenir, insoucieuse du sang répandu? Sans conducteur, au milieu des ténébres, en bête aveugle et sourde qu'on aurait lâchée parmi la*

mort, elle roulait, elle roulait, chargée de cette chair à canon, des ces soldats, déjà hébétés de fatigue, et ivres, qui chantaient. (285)

But now, all of the telegraphs on the line were ringing, all the hearts were beating at the news of the ghost train that had just been seen at Rouen and at Sotteville. There was trembling with fear: an express was further ahead and would probably be caught. [...] [The train] terrified Pont-de-la-Arche, as its speed seemed not to slacken. Once more, having disappeared, it rolled and rolled into the black night, no one knew where—out there, somewhere. What did it matter the victims it crushed on its way! Was it not going into the future regardless, heedless of bloodshed? Through the darkness, without conductor, like a blind and deaf beast unleashed to die, it rolled. It rolled, loaded with cannon fodder, these soldiers, already numb with fatigue and drink, singing.

Zola's novel becomes in the end—like "The Signal Man"— a type of ghost story. The "*train fantôme*" is driverless, potentially impossible to locate in space ("*ne savait où, là-bas*"), but it is also carries ghosts. The singing soldiers are, in a sense, already dead. They are being delivered to a *massacre* as cannon fodder ("*chair à canon*"). It is the train as a ghost train and train of ghosts that brings terror along the line—the ringing telegraphs and beating hearts, as well as the threat that of a collision that could happen at any moment.

But the soldiers are not merely ghosts. As the train picks up speed, the songs they sing—louder and louder— are "*refrains patriotiques*" ("patriotic refrains"; 285).

These soldiers are figured as more than just passengers on a train or soldiers—and even more than a representation of the railway public (though, in their vulnerability, they are that as well). As Zola himself notes in his sketches for the novel, "*[m]ettre le train plein de gais soldats inconscients du danger qui chantent des refrains patriotiques. Le train est l'image alors de la France*" ("put inside the train raucous soldiers unconscious of the danger and singing patriotic tunes. That way, the train is the image of France"; qtd. in [and trans. by] Gordon 165). The doomed soldiers and their patriotism make the train—rushing headlong into impending disaster—a representation of France itself. For Zola, the railway disaster becomes interchangeable with another contemporary disaster, that of an ill-considered war. There is an expansion here of the scale of the disaster in question. It is no longer a train full of passengers that is at risk, but rather an entire society. France is barreling heedlessly toward its own destruction.

Yet, the critique here is more complicated. The affect that is associated with this doomed train is not limited to fear and regret. Although we have no reason to believe that the soldiers on the train know what has befallen the conductor and fireman, it seems an overstatement to suggest that they are, in Zola's words, "*inconscients du danger.*" They may not recognize the danger of the train, but their hearty choruses of patriotic songs seem to suggest that they are well aware of the danger that awaits them at Saarbrücken. We are meant to read the soldiers on the train, rather, as embracing the death that is rushing toward them—albeit perhaps more

quickly than they realize. It is this that makes them, in addition to the fatigue and drink, the beasts that the adjective *hébétés* implicitly suggests.

And what of the observers of this ghost train? Using *style indirect libre*, the narrator ventriloquizes (and satirizes) the voice of the public and of common sense in the two rhetorical exclamations that open the final paragraph. "*Qu'importaient les victimes que la machine écrassait en chemin! N'allait-elle pas quand même à l'avenir, insoucieuse du sang répandu?*" The casualties—whether the soldiers or the passengers on the other train(s) that will be run down—do not matter. There is an acceptance in these exclamations, a professed willingness to overlook the "*sang répandu*" caused by the runaway train. Such acceptance relies on the justifying power of "*l'avenir*," the future. Much as Dickens's critique of the disaster of the railways in *Dombey and Son* relies on a potential irony in the railway's "mighty course of civilisation and improvement," Zola's invocation of "*l'avenir*" here provides a commentary on the discourses of technological progress that underlie the destructive potential of the railways. Yet, as with Dickens, there is no reason to believe that Zola's irony here is entirely free from an undercurrent of sincere appreciation. As Baroli suggests, when it came to the subject of railways, "[Zola] *le voit tel qu'il est et à la place qu'il occupe, mais il se plaît y arrêter son regard et l'observer avec admiration*" ("[Zola] sees it as it is and the place that it occupies, but he derived pleasure from fixing his gaze on it and observing it with admiration"; 230; my translation).

We can consider the ghost train at the end of the novel as a sign of two impulses, calling forth two different narrative orientations. In one sense, the train is a representation of progress, of moving forward into *l'avenir*, the future that is to come. It is a figure of modernity that cannot be stopped, regardless of the bloodshed that it produces. There is an inexorability about the movement into the future here. In another sense, however, the runaway train is also a figure of a collective will to destruction. We can read such a desire in the layers of meaning that accrete to the narrative here: the collective embrace of death by the soldiers, the collective willingness of conventional wisdom to accept disaster as part of the path to the future, and the collective acceptance of the Franco-Prussian war by the French public. In the overlaying of these levels of meaning, the narrative suggests a collective impulse toward destruction. It is a death drive at the level of nation or society, oriented toward a disaster that threatens the foundations of social life.

Is there a contradiction here? A tension between progress and destruction? In the figure of the ghost train, these two impulses bleed into each other and become indistinguishable. The orientation toward the future, with its corresponding valorization of progress, seems to crumble once we begin to consider exactly what that future might look like. After all, the future that the train is hurtling toward is its own destruction. It is clear that it will collide with another train or derail on a curve (or, if all obstacles disappear, it will smash into the terminus at Paris). The future for the train and for the soldiers onboard is nothing but a disaster. The narrative's invocation of the future here is empty—it is an orientation that conceals that there is

no real future for the train, for the soldiers, or (figuratively) for France. Zola's narrative reveals a logic beneath the discourse of the future. The desire for progress that justifies the casualties of railway disasters is itself merely a camouflaged or disavowed desire for casualty—on a grand scale.

This, ultimately, is the final irony that *La Bête humaine* offers to my reading of the construction of a traumatized railway public. Zola's novel, like the other narratives that I have read in this chapter, provides a representation of a collective created by trauma. Both the railway workers and the passengers share a vulnerability and a sense of the constant threat of disastrous violence. Yet there is, in that collective experience, a potential desire for the dissolution of that very collective. Zola's narrative is drawn toward a future, but that future brings destruction and the threat of the death or dissolution of collective life. At the end of the narrative, the soldiers and the voice of conventional wisdom embrace the future—embracing, at the same time, the lack of a future.

There are echoes here of Lee Edelman's reading of queerness as a figure for the death drive. For Edelman, "the death drive names what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability" (9). There is an analogous movement at work in the construction of the railway public. The threat of trauma that produces a sense of shared vulnerability creates a community of the traumatized, a social form. And yet, at the same time, as Zola's narrative suggests, there is an impulse of negativity in that very collective formation, a desire for the dissolution and destruction of that formation. The threat of

disaster both creates and undoes the collective. The future of a disaster public is, ultimately, to succumb to disaster.

CHAPTER 3

"Something Is Wrong, Somewhere":

Catastrophization and Responsibility in *Bleak House*

"Let us suppose that the great empire of China, with all its myriads of inhabitants, was suddenly swallowed up by an earthquake, and let us consider how a man of humanity in Europe, who had no sort of connection with that part of the world, would be affected upon receiving intelligence of this dreadful calamity" (211-12).
—Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1767).

"In Brueghel's *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure" (14-17).
—W. H. Auden, "Musée des Beaux Arts" (1938).

In 1901, just months after the death of Queen Victoria, a journalist and reformer named William Digby offered a sobering reflection on her reign and the corresponding history of the British nineteenth century: "When the part played by the British Empire in the nineteenth century is regarded by the historian fifty years hence, [...] the most striking and most saddening of all incidents for comment will be the steady sinking of India and its population into a state of chronic famine-strickenness" (*"Prosperous"*122). Digby could claim expertise on this topic; he had been chronicling famine in the Indian subcontinent for more twenty-five years (Brown). As the editor of the *Madras Times*, he had witnessed firsthand the unimaginably disastrous famine of 1876-1878, which the official British government inquiry estimated to have killed more than five and a half million people (*Report of the Indian Famine Commission* 28). Digby provided his own contemporaneous account of the devastation, arguing that "so disastrous and terrible a visitation [...] deserved

some permanent record" (*Famine Campaign* viii). Both Digby and the Famine Commission looked toward a future without another such a disastrous occurrence. Digby, for his part, hoped for political pressure strong enough "as would render it impossible in future that such a calamity as this, in which several millions of lives have been sacrificed to hunger and want-induced disease, should occur" (*Famine Campaign* viii). The Famine Commission was more sanguine:

> we are not without hope that [famine's] effects will in future be gradually diminished in intensity, partly by the more efficient character of the relief given, partly by the extension of the means of communication and development of internal trade, and partly by the greater preparedness of the people to meet them which grows from the increase of thrift and resourcefulness, and the accumulation of capital due to a settled and civilised government. (29)

In other words, the Indian Famine Commission expected the continuation of British colonial policy to gradually decrease the risk of future famine. As long as Britain stayed the course, there would be no reason to expect another disaster of this magnitude.

The Famine Commission was horribly wrong. In the remaining years of the nineteenth century, India saw repeated recurring small famines—culminating in another catastrophic famine from 1896-1902. Working with multiple sources, Mike Davis has estimated the total mortality from these two major Indian famines to be somewhere between twelve million and 29 million lives (*Late* 7). Yet, as Digby

reports incredulously in his 1901 summation (with its bitterly ironic use of quotation marks), *"Prosperous" British India*, there still remained at least "two schools" of thought on recent Indian history: "one is always referring to the increasing prosperity of the country and people, and claiming unstinting praise for England as the creator of this prosperity; the other is incessantly dilating upon the rapidly-growing and now alarming impoverishment of both country and people" (xix). In his book, Digby argues persuasively for the second school of thought using official documents "which the Government of India and the Secretary of State supply" (xx). Digby's purpose here—as strange as it may seem considering that the fact of the deaths of millions of Indians is not seriously in dispute—is to convince his readers that a catastrophe has occurred. He pleads with the reader to not blame him for bringing it to notice: "if a true statement be given concerning an existing disaster, and accurate signs of a coming catastrophe are announced, he who makes the statement and utters the announcement does not cause the disaster or create the catastrophe" (xx). In one sense, this statement is a defense against charges of being unpatriotic, of being too ready to criticize Britain and its Empire. But this statement performs something else. By specifically likening the situation in India to a "disaster" or "catastrophe," Digby is making a claim that a specific type of event has occurred: one that *demands* attention, explanation, or response.

Following this lead, we can get a sense of a second purpose in *"Prosperous" British India*. Digby's book is also an attempt to create *responsibility* for the catastrophe in India. There are two different, though clearly related, valences of

responsibility in question here. First, there is something that we might think of as causal or agentic responsibility, the question of what or who actually caused the catastrophe. Such a question is necessarily a political one. In the Indian Famine Commission's report on the 1876-78 famine, the authors claim that the disaster had "aris[en] from causes wholly beyond human control" (34). Digby, in contrast, blames—at least partially—British policies in India. He notes that "the [second school of thought on India] declare[s] that, by the principles of [British] rule, deliberately adopted, the impoverishment is made inevitable" (xix). In this analysis, Digby engages in what Mike Davis calls the "political ecology of famine," the recognition that political factors can produce a seemingly "natural" disaster (*Late* 15). We can now determine that the failure of the Indian monsoons in the final quarter of the nineteenth century was linked to the El Niño-Southern Oscillation (Davis *Late* 13-14). However, as Davis notes, such climatological variables do not account for the ways that political structures turn drought into mass death: "whether or not crop failure leads to starvation, and who, in the event of famine, starves, depends on a host of nonlinear social factors" (*Late* 19). These factors, as Amartya Sen has argued, are economic, legal, and political. Famines are not necessarily about lack of food, but rather about lack of access to food. Sen's analyses focus on "the ability of different sections of the population to establish command over food, using the entitlement relations operating in that society depending on its legal, economic, political, and social characteristics" (162). It is a similar host of social factors that Digby outlines in his indictment of British policy in India.

There is a second valence of responsibility that concerns Digby. This is the question of what we might call humanitarian responsibility—the sense that we have an ethical obligation to help those who are victims of a catastrophe, whether or not we have (or whether we recognize that we have) a role in causing that catastrophe. It is this sense of responsibility that is the focus of the epigraphs to this chapter: Adam Smith's famous "thought experiment" about a devastating earthquake in China, and W. H. Auden's meditation on the reaction of the figures in Brueghel's *Icarus*. The question of this responsibility rests on whether one considers another's disaster to be, in Auden's phrase, an "important failure"—worthy of one's attention and concern.

During the famine of 1876-78, there was both acceptance and denial of such humanitarian responsibility in Britain. A number of public figures, including the Viceroy and Governor-General, Lord Lytton (son of Edward Bulwer Lytton), dismissed any humanitarian response entirely, decrying the "humanitarian hysterics" and "cheap sentiment" on the part of the general public (Steele 98). Digby, in contrast, praises this public response, testifying to the "marvellous and greatly abounding sympathy displayed by the people all parts of the British dominions towards their suffering fellow-subjects in Southern India" (*Famine Campaign* viii). And indeed, more than £820,000 in contributions was raised for Digby's relief fund, which he distributed throughout India in 1878 (Brown).

> Almost two decades later, he makes a similar humanitarian plea to his readers:
>
> if the case I put forward be proved, no man or woman who becomes acquainted with it may, henceforth, refrain from doing something to remedy

> so gross and so grievous a wrong as is embodied in the material impoverishment and the political degradation of two hundred and thirty millions of British subjects. The times of past ignorance may be pardoned: with knowledge comes responsibility. (xxiii)

Digby is offering a theory of ethical responsibility, one in which responsibility for mass suffering depends merely on knowledge of that suffering. In such a situation, knowledge must produce action. It is key that such an ethical responsibility seems to devolve on every man or woman "who becomes acquainted" with the suffering—regardless of one's specific level of causal responsibility for that suffering. For example, one might argue that British citizens would have a greater responsibility for the disaster in India than non-citizens or that men—as voters—should feel more direct responsibility than women. Digby's appeal here, in contrast, seems to rely less on a feeling of shared causal responsibility and more on a feeling of shared human responsibility.

The example of Digby and the Indian famines of the last quarter of the nineteenth century serves here as a primer for the concerns of this chapter. In this chapter, I examine the intersection between two different discourses: recognition/identification of catastrophe and ethical responsibility for catastrophe. I step back almost twenty-five years from the famines, to a set of texts that cluster around Charles Dickens and his novel *Bleak House*, published in monthly installments between 1852 and 1853. I argue that *Bleak House* is fundamentally preoccupied—and, ultimately, derailed—by the complicated interplay between the

discourses that Digby would depend on at the cusp of the twentieth century: the discourses of catastrophe and responsibility. As Dickens was one of the quintessential reformers of mid-Victorian society, *Bleak House* remains an essential text for understanding catastrophe, ethics, and humanitarianism in this period. However, at the same time, *Bleak House*'s understanding of these discourses is, finally, both tentative and potentially contradictory. In its contradictions, the novel serves as a model for the struggle of thinking about global ethical responsibility and humanitarianism in the early moments of development of those discourses.

Bleak House*, Cholera, and Catastrophization*

Bleak House is a disaster novel without a disaster. The temporal location of the novel seems to be that of a pause or an intermission between disasters. As the novel opens, we find ourselves in the immediate aftermath of the Flood, with "as much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth" (5). However, this post-diluvian world can only look toward the next Deluge. The eyes of the narrative are already fixed on the next catastrophe, one that seems to be just on the verge of arriving. Mr. Snagsby, in a famous line from the novel, reckons that "something is wrong, somewhere; but what something, what may come of it, to whom, when, and from which unthought of and unheard of quarter, is the puzzle of his life" (315).

Multiple characters experience this premonition of disaster and attempt to pin down its arrival in different ways. Will it be another Great Fire? As Esther Summerson walks through the foggy streets of London, she questions whether "there

was a great fire anywhere? For the streets were so full of dense brown smoke" (29). Or is it to be political collapse? Sir Leceister Dedlock wonders "to what the present age is tending" (145), despairing of an imminent governmental crisis that can be likened to a "shipwreck" (145) or "the obliteration of landmarks, and opening of floodgates" (356). Or, as in the obsessive repetitions of mad Miss Flite, is it a type of apocalyptic justice?: "I expect a judgment. Shortly. On the Day of Judgment" (34). And yet, none of these disasters arrive. Indeed, nothing happens in the novel that—in comparison with the texts I have read in previous chapters—would even seem to qualify as a disaster. There are no floods, no volcanic eruptions, no railroad accidents.[1] That is to say, there is no discrete event that produces mass casualty in the novel.

Although such events seem to be lacking, the word "catastrophe" does appear thrice in the novel. It is connected on all three occasions with the death by "Spontaneous Combustion" of Krook (403). In this context, though, the word "catastrophe" serves as a marker of a particularly shocking event in the narrative—an event that could not have been predicted and that refigures the direction of the narrative. The use of "catastrophe" here is also an acknowledgement by the narrative of the sensational character of such an event (although Dickens goes out of his way in

[1] There is a shipwreck that occurs, but it is narrated briefly and indirectly. Miss Flite summarizes the account in the newspaper to Esther, who then reads it herself. While Miss Flite offers a few details, Esther's recounting of it is entirely through the lens of her own emotional reactions: "I *did* read all the noble history; though very slowly and imperfectly then, for my eyes were so dimmed that I could not see the words, and I cried so much that I was many times obliged to lay down the long account she had cut out of the newspaper" (442).

the novel's Preface to defend the realism of such a spectacular death). Despite such a prefatory defense and despite the way in which such a death by "corrupted humours of the vicious body" (403) adds to the novel's general affective tone of incipient collapse, the narrative's interest in Krook's conflagratory demise remains limited. Krook's death, despite the noun that stands in for it, is not the catastrophe that *Bleak House* is concerned about. This is not the disaster that the novel circles around. Rather, the narrative is more preoccupied by another catastrophe—one that much more clearly relates to the understanding of catastrophe as an event that produces mass death. This more significant catastrophe is invoked in the narrative primarily (indeed, almost entirely) by allusion and metonymy. This catastrophe is cholera.

The word "cholera" does not appear in *Bleak House*. Yet the narrative is shot through with anxiety about "malignant disease" (137), "fever" (197), and "infection and contagion" (553). Such anxiety about contagion seems reasonable in the narrative, considering that the occasional narrator Esther catches a fever from the homeless waif Jo, an illness that results in her disfigurement and Jo's death. That the novel never identifies their shared illness as smallpox (despite the clearly recognizable symptoms—especially to a Victorian reader) suggests that the narrative is less interested in making distinctions between diseases and more interested in tracing general patterns of contagion. There is no reason that we could not read Esther and Jo's illness as a metonym for cholera. Despite the seemingly general category of disease or "fever" that the narrative seems to be deploying, there are good reasons to focus specifically on cholera as an anxiety in this cultural moment.

Although there are moments in the novel that suggest that the events in the narrative are intended to be taking place in the early 1830s (e.g., the prediction that "railroads shall soon traverse all this country" [654]), the novel's concerns are firmly rooted in the period of its composition. As John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson note, "[*Bleak House*] was a fable for 1852" (179). As such, the question of cholera would have been unavoidable. By the early 1850s, two major epidemics would have swept through England (and, indeed, Europe). The epidemic that reached England in 1831 killed 32,000; the epidemic of 1848-1849 killed 62,000 (O'Connor 25). However, these numbers—especially in comparison to mortality rates for other contemporary diseases—do not capture the cultural weight of cholera in this period. Erin O'Connor notes:

> Statistically, Asiatic cholera was not the most lethal disease of the Victorian period. It killed far fewer people than endemic diseases such as fever, tuberculosis, measles, and influenza; indeed, in 1848 influenza killed fifty thousand people in London alone, more than five times the number that would die from cholera in that city the following year. Even so, cholera's social significance was tremendous; it killed with a violence that was shocking to behold, and no one knew what caused it or how it could be cured. But the disease itself was unmistakable: horribly dehydrated after purging massive amounts of "rice-water" diarrhea, its victims could be dead within a few hours and seldom lasted more than two or three days. (32)

Cholera captured the Victorian imagination not because of how many people it killed, but rather because of how it killed. As O'Connor makes clear, death by cholera was a horrifying spectacle. To add to the terror, as Marie-Hélène Huet notes, because each cholera epidemic traveled across Asia to Europe, it was possible for people in England and France to chart the disease's progress toward their own countries. For this reason, "the cholera epidemic that swept Europe in the early 1830s was different from any previous plague in that it was entirely foreseen and expected" (Huet 60). Europeans could only wait and watch each epidemic's "inexorable advance" (Huet 61). Part of the horror of cholera is that one could see it coming.

Fear of cholera significantly reshaped public life during the period preceding *Bleak House*. Partly driven by a desire to understand and prevent future outbreaks of cholera, Edwin Chadwick published his landmark *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* in 1842. Chadwick's *Report* is considered one of the inaugural documents of the public health movement, "the first official document to broadcast an emerging social perspective, in which health, morality, and political stability were linked to environmental factors" (Goodlad 530). Chadwick's perspective "inspired the first sociological investigations of slums" (O'Connor 32). Even so, as Lauren M. E. Goodlad notes, legislative reform lagged well behind the scientific documentation, and "it was not until 1848, when dread of approaching cholera diminished resistance to legislative action, that Lord Morpeth's compromised Public Health bill was enacted" (528). Even so, the bill contained

"manifest failures"; at the time of *Bleak House*, the question of cholera and sanitary reform was still very much unresolved (Goodlad 526).

But how then is cholera a disaster in *Bleak House*? When the narrative wants to summon the specter of cholera as a disaster, it does so under the sign of "Tooting." The disaster at Tooting would have been well known to English readers in this period. In late 1848 and early 1849, more than one hundred and fifty children died of cholera at the Juvenile Pauper Asylum run by Bartholomew Drouet near Tooting. Inquiries into the disaster uncovered scandalously poor conditions at Drouet's child-farm. Dickens, in a fit of outrage, wrote four front-page articles about the disaster for the *Examiner*. In one, entitled—with bitter sarcasm—"The Paradise at Tooting," he denounced the farm as "brutally conducted, vilely kept, preposterously inspected, dishonestly defended, a disgrace to the Christian community, and a stain upon a civilised land" (quoted in Brice and Fielding 232). Drouet was tried before the Central Criminal Court on a case of manslaughter. However, as Dickens was to suggest in his article "A Recorder's Charge," the fix was in; the Recorder who presented the charge to the court summarized the case and the controlling legal principles in such as a way as to cast Drouet's guilt into doubt from the beginning. Dickens's fury was incandescent:

> The Recorder talks about 'an ordinary case of manslaughter,' as if there were nothing whatever in the Tooting case to make it an *extra*ordinary one. The question is, *what act* has been done by the defendant to conduce to the death of the deceased! Is it? Or does the question extend itself into a series of acts,

> no one among them in itself perhaps involving the terrible catastrophe so widely known, but all, taken together, involving that degree of gross neglect of ordinary precaution for the safety of human life, which constitutes one form of manslaughter? (quoted in Brice and Fielding 236; emphasis in original)

What Dickens argues against here is a simplistic theory of catastrophe—a theory that the Recorder in the case puts forth as the legal standard for manslaughter. In this theory, Drouet would only be responsible for the deaths at his orphanage if it could be shown that he took one direct action that produced the cholera epidemic. A pattern of ongoing neglect that puts into place the conditions for an epidemic cannot, as per the Recorder in the case, be defined as legal responsibility for the catastrophic outcome. In other words, while Drouet may have prepared the children to die by cholera, it could not be proved that he actually gave them cholera.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the legal restrictions on the charge in the case, Drouet was acquitted. In "The Verdict for Drouet," Dickens summarizes once again, almost hopelessly, the facts of the case: "The hunger and thirst were proved; the bad food and the insufficient clothing; the cold, the ill-treatment, the uncleanliness; the diseases generated by filth and neglect; the itch [...], the scald heads, the sore eyes, scrofulous affections, the pot bellies, and the thin shanks. All were proved" (quoted in Brice and Fielding 241). Appallingly, legal responsibility for the catastrophe could not be concluded from these facts. Dickens's response to the verdict was a bitter prophecy in the form of a rhetorical question: "Will all our [legal experts] insist, like

the Recorder, on having the Tooting tragedy in 'one act,' or will any of them be content to read it in fifty?"

In Drouet's manslaughter trial, the court required that all of the dead children be represented by just one child—for whose death Drouet would be tried (Brice and Fielding 240). In *Bleak House*, the victims of Drouet's crime are represented in the person of one character: Guster (Augusta), the serving girl of the Snagsbys. She is described as an "orphan charge of the Christian saint whose shrine was at Tooting" (323). And although Guster is a minor character, and though Tooting is only referenced in the text four times (always in connection with her), the narrative's sarcasm directed toward Drouet (unnamed) is ruthless. The narrative notes that "although she was farmed or contracted for, during her growing time, by an amiable benefactor of his species resident at Tooting, and cannot fail to have been developed under the most favourable circumstances, [she] 'has fits'—which the parish can't account for" (117). Her seizures, the narrator suggests, signal "that Guster has a tender heart, and a susceptible something that possibly might have been imagination, but for Tooting and her patron saint" (136). Guster is a damaged character; she has survived Tooting, but her imagination has not. However, the narrator's ironic indictment of Tooting implicates more than just Drouet, the "patron saint"; it also links his crimes to both local government (the "parish" that would have, under the New Poor Law, assigned Guster to the Drouet farm in the first place) and to (a version of) Christianity itself. The narrative's condemnation of Guster's experience speaks to a system, not just to one person.

But though Guster is a result of this system, we must recognize—as readers of the novel would have—that she is also a representative in the narrative of the disaster of cholera. Cholera is a product, both metonymically and metaphorically, of Tooting. Through Guster, and also beyond her, *Bleak House* wants to call up the history of Tooting not solely as an instance of mass death (cholera as an event, as a catastrophe), but also as a model for how a catastrophic event is brought into being. The reference to Tooting here is about more than the one hundred and fifty dead children; it is also about the neglect, the "hunger and thirst," "the itch," and all of the other conditions for which Dickens and other chroniclers held Drouet responsible, the conditions that made possible the disaster of mass death by cholera. *Bleak House* is not a novel of catastrophe, but a novel of *catastrophization*.

This distinction relies on recent theoretical work by Adi Ophir, who borrows the term "catastrophization" from psychiatry and cognitive psychology. In these disciplines, Ophir notes, catastrophization refers to a cognitive process by which a person interprets the world in such a way as to see negative outcomes as looming or imminent (60). Catastrophization is a lens through which some subjects view the world. The task, then, of the psychiatrist or cognitive psychologist is to find a way to encourage the patient or subject to reevaluate the world so that it seems less threatening or anxiety-provoking. However, as Ophir argues, sometimes the world is actually threatening and disaster is indeed looming. Ophir takes catastrophization from the realm of the psychological and places it firmly in the realm of the material. He suggests that "taking the possibility of real catastrophes into account, one may say

that 'catastrophization' is a disorder, indeed, but of the world, not of the mind" (60). Catastrophization, then, becomes the name of something that happens in the world. It is, as Ophir defines it, "a process in which natural and man-made forces and factors work together to create devastating effects on a large population" (60).

The key to understanding Ophir's intervention is to recognize how catastrophization relates to catastrophe. A catastrophe is an event; catastrophization is a process (61). Catastrophe "transforms both time and space," whereas catastrophization is a process that may be "slow" or even "imperceptible" (61). As Ophir argues, "what matters in catastrophization is the steady and significant rise in the presence of, quantity, and effect of evils—the volume of evils—and the decline in the means for protection and relief" (61). Catastrophization leads, then, to catastrophe. It is the steady accumulation of "evils" that brings a state of the world to the point of an event that significantly changes the experience of time or space for a group of people, a population, or a nation. However, the link between catastrophe and catastrophization is not inexorable. Ophir clarifies that "catastrophization is a process in which catastrophe is imminent. However, what is imminent has not happened yet. This suspended moment of catastrophe, which catastrophization implies, this interval [...] makes possible both moral urgency and political manipulation" (62). Catastrophe is not inevitable. It can loom, "suspended." During this moment, the coming catastrophe can be averted or altered. It is in this moment, Ophir notes, that individual or political agency can intervene in the process. And it is in this suspended moment, I suggest, that the narrative in *Bleak House* exists. It is not, then, a disaster novel

without a disaster, but rather a novel that recognizes the existence of processes that will lead to disaster. The moment in *Bleak House* is the moment for Ophir's "moral urgency or political manipulation."

However, to understand how these interventions may be manifested, it is necessary to follow Ophir in distinguishing between two "planes" of catastrophization: objective and discursive (63). Objective catastrophization is the sum of the actual processes that are operating in the world to produce the coming catastrophe. This is an aggregation of the natural and human-driven actions and interactions that are increasing the likelihood of a catastrophic event. Discursive catastrophization, in contrast, is the representation of the world in such a way as to call attention to the processes that are tending (or, in retrospect, have tended) toward catastrophe. For Ophir,

> discursive catastrophization is the more or less systematic response to—or preemption of—unacknowledged or disavowed actual [objective] catastrophization. [...] Catastrophization in this [discursive] sense is a way to describe a state of affairs so as to make what has been a 'tolerable' or 'normal' situation seem too dangerous or intolerable, to arouse moral and political reactions, and to mobilize assistance. (64)

This type of catastrophization, then, is an attempt to construct discursively an account of a catastrophe (to come, ongoing, or in the past) in such a way as to call attention to it as catastrophe. But discursive catastrophization is not solely a process of description; it is not merely an account of what everyone already clearly accepts as

having occurred (or occurring). Ophir points out that "establishing the fact that a catastrophe is actually taking place or that it did or is about to take place is precisely what is at stake in discursive catastrophization. In other words, discursive catastrophization is a formation of discourse in which the occurrence of a catastrophe is always problematized" (68). Discursive catastrophization, then, is a type of argument. It is making a case about the state of the world. As such, it wants to be a performative.

Although Ophir locates the birth of discursive catastrophization as a genre to the Crimean War, I argue for an earlier appearance of this genre: in the work of Dickens (and other social reformers) throughout the 1830s and 1840s. I read *Bleak House* as a novel of discursive catastrophization, focused (but by no means solely) on cholera. Its aim, to follow Mr. Snagsby's formulation, is to tell us what is wrong and where. We have already seen how the allusions to Tooting in the narrative provide implicit reference to cholera and the conditions under which it can become a catastrophe. However, the narrative of *Bleak House* is much more explicit and much more elaborate in its discursive catastrophization of this issue.

The focal point for the catastrophization of cholera in *Bleak House* is the semi-abandoned and decaying street called, by the London underclass, "Tom-all-Alone's" (197). It is a "ruinous place," "a black, dilapidated street, avoided by all decent people; where the crazy houses were seized upon, when their decay was far advanced, by some bold vagrants" (197). In this liminal condition, unintegrated with decent London, the street acts as an incubator for catastrophe:

> these tumbling tenements contain, by night, a swarm of misery. As, on the ruined human wretch, vermin parasites appear, so these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that crawls in and out of gaps in the walls and boards; and coils itself to sleep, in maggot numbers, where the rain drips in; and comes and goes, fetching and carrying fever, and sowing more evil in its every footprint than [...] all the fine gentlemen in office [...] shall set right in five hundred years—though born expressly to do it. (197)

In this passage, the narrative posits Tom-all-Alone's (and more broadly, the city of London) as a body, one that is swarmed by the "vagrants" and poor who sleep there at night. There is a parallel process at work here. As "vermin" and "maggots" spread disease among humans, the human vermin of Tom-all-Alone's spread disease to the broader social body, "fetching and carrying fever." The passage ends on a note despair for the possibility of governmental amelioration of the products of Tom-all-Alone's—at least based on the current crop of "fine gentlemen in office." Both as a part of the social body of London and in its relation to the official political world, the narrative constructs Tom-all-Alone's—as well as several other spaces of desolation in the novel—as "a shameful testimony to future ages, how civilisation and barbarism walked this boastful island together" (137).

For the process of discursive catastrophization, as practiced in *Bleak House*, it is essential for there to be an objective analogue—some state of affairs in the world to which the discursive construction can refer. And indeed, Tom-all-Alone's is merely a fictionalized account of an actual district in London, a section of Bermondsey called

Jacob's Island. This neighborhood and its unsavory reputation were popularized by the journalist and reformer Henry Mayhew in an 1849 letter to *The Morning Chronicle* entitled "A Visit to the Cholera Districts of Bermondsey." Mayhew's letter offers the social scientific suggestion that it is possible to plot the cases of cholera on a map of London, localizing what "may be more literally than metaphorically styled the plague-spots of London" (4).[2] Mayhew's dispatch from Jacob's Island is harrowing; his eye for nauseous detail is on full display. He links, by association, incidence of cholera with the foul open sewers that run down the middle of the street:

> In No. 1 of this street the cholera first appeared seventeen years ago, and spread up it with fearful virulence; but this year it appeared at the opposite end, and ran down it with like severity. As we passed along the reeking banks of the sewer the sun shone upon a narrow slip of the water. In the bright light it appeared the colour of strong green tea, and positively looked as solid as black marble in the shadow—indeed it was more like watery mud than muddy water; and yet we were assured this was the only water the wretched inhabitants had to drink. [...] And yet, as we stood doubting this fearful statement, we saw a little child, from one of the galleries opposite, lower a tin can with a rope to fill a large bucket that stood beside her. (4)

When compared to Mayhew's descriptions of the cholera districts of London, the evocations of filth in Tom-all-Alone's in *Bleak House* are subdued, almost discreet.

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[2] The usefulness of such a map would become clear just a few years later as epidemiologist John Snow's plot of cholera cases from an 1854 outbreak led him to identify the source of contamination as a pump on Broad Street (39-40).

As Regenia Gagnier notes, Dickens found himself caught between accurate depiction of such horrors and a commitment to "the conventions of middle-class decorum in writing" (163). However, despite Dickens's discretion, Tom-all-Alone's can rely on more explicit depictions of London slums in the popular press—accounts such as Mayhew's—for its rhetorical power.

But the narrative of *Bleak House* does go beyond Mayhew's reports in one important sense. It makes more explicit the status of Tom-all-Alone's as a site of contagion that does more than threaten the health of a handful of paupers who live on the infernal street. Cholera and other diseases are fatal to the residents of Tom-all-Alone's, of course. As Jo notes, "they dies down in Tom-all-Alone's in heaps. They dies more than they lives, according to what *I* see" (383, emphasis in original). But "they" are not the only ones who die. Rather than localizing cholera in one district, *Bleak House* constructs Tom-all-Alone's as a source of catastrophe far beyond its limited geographical borders. The narrative traces this catastrophe, personifying (in this passage) Tom-all-Alone's simply as "Tom," turning the street into a human agent:

> But he has his revenge. Even the winds are his messengers, and they serve him in these hours of darkness. There is not a drop of Tom's corrupted blood but propagates infection and contagion somewhere. It shall pollute, this very night, the choice stream [...] of a Norman house, and his Grace shall not be able to say Nay to the infamous alliance. There is not an atom of Tom's slime, not a cubic inch of any pestilential gas in which he lives, not one obscenity or degradation about him, not an ignorance, not a wickedness, not a brutality of

> his committing, but shall work its retribution, through every order of society, up to the proudest of the proud, and to the highest of the high. (553).

The novel outlines a logic of contagion, by which both literal and metaphorical disease spread from the neglected haunts of the poor and forgotten to infect and destroy "every order of society." *Bleak House* is constructing an account of potential catastrophe that demands action based on a rational calculation of risk. The infection (again, both literal and figurative) that is allowed to fester hidden away from polite society will not remain so. Or, as Dickens himself put it—more pragmatically—in an 1851 address to the Metropolitan Sanitary Association: "the air from Gin Lane will be carried, when the wind is Easterly, into May Fair, and that if you have a vigorous pestilence raging furiously in Saint Giles's, no mortal list of Lady Patronesses can keep it out of Almack's" (quoted in Fielding 128). And indeed, *Bleak House* doesn't just argue for the contagion of disease from low to high, it dramatizes it in the transmission of smallpox from the urchin Jo to Esther.

However, in the character of Jo, *Bleak House* does more than offer a pragmatic case for why all residents of London should be concerned with the potential catastrophe brewing in the sewer ditches of Tom-all-Alone's. The novel also makes the case for the alleviation of the suffering of the underclass by portraying that suffering as worthy of sympathy. Sympathetic urchins are a specialty of Dickens, and Jo takes his place in an established tradition. Relying on this tradition, the novel expects sympathy or compassion to produce a sense of moral urgency. Jo's death in the novel is almost unbearable in its pathos. Hounded by the police, persecuted by

philanthropists, in the end Jo becomes little more than bare life. As the narrator summarizes him, he is "neither of the beasts, nor of humanity" (564). Jo expires as he struggles to repeat the Lord's Prayer, his death becoming an accusation that the narrator casts toward the guilty: "[Jo is] Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day" (572). This is a remarkable, and remarkably direct, address—both a charge and an appeal. The narrator here presses responsibility for Jo and his death on those in power, those of the church, and ordinary men and women (imputed, by the narrator, to have "Heavenly compassion in [their] hearts"). But Jo's death is not singular. The sympathy and responsibility that is being invoked here is also meant to be general; indeed, there are Jos "dying thus around us every day." Here we have an illustration of the "fifty acts" that Dickens prophesied for the Tooting disaster, the repetition of preventable death.

As a work of discursive catastrophization, *Bleak House* makes a case for the threat of cholera and its relation to sanitation and poverty. It constructs a picture of the London slums, influenced heavily by Mayhew's accounts, as a threat to public health—and to moral order. In this discourse, the slums threaten everyone, not only the poor who live there for lack of alternatives. A logic of contagion governs the influence of the slums on the rest of the metropolis. But *Bleak House* goes further, calling attention to the public health emergency, but also to the tragedy of mass death. The poor are dying "in heaps" and "dying thus [...] every day." In this, the novel

makes a bid for sympathetic engagement. *Bleak House* establishes a case for moral urgency and political intervention and it does so by identifying and directly addressing those who it deems responsible: those with political power and, even more broadly, those who can be moved to compassion by the plight of Jo and his ilk. Though, as we have seen, the narrative expresses some doubt that the "fine gentlemen" who currently hold power will be able to ameliorate the situation.

But what, then, does *Bleak House* want? Once it has created a discourse that cries out for action, what would it have us do? One clear reform that the novel advocates is the reform of Chancery, the court that dealt at the time with legacies and trusts. The Chancery plot is one of the major threads of the novel; it is the interminable legal case of Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce that brings together all of the characters in the novel and that propels the plot. Although this plot may seem to be unrelated to the novel's catastrophization of sanitary conditions, the novel's well-known disdain for Chancery intersects with these concerns in an indirect way. As the narrative notes, the Court of Chancery "has its decaying houses and its blighted lands in every shire" (6). And indeed, we are to discover that Tom-all-Alone's is one of those: "this desirable property is in Chancery, of course," although for what reason and as part of which case, "perhaps nobody knows" (198). The abandonment of Tom-all-Alone's, and thus, indirectly, the disease that it incubates, is due to its being lost in the fog of a Chancery case. In this way, the novel makes a connection between sanitary reform and legal reform, between moral responsibility for the poor and a broader responsibility to overhaul the English administrative system.

But is there a more direct intervention to be performed here? What is to be done with cases like Jo? On this topic, the novel offers the examples of Esther and the doctor Allan Woodcourt. When Esther comes across the sick Jo, wandering in near delirium around the countryside near Bleak House, she decides that she "must not leave the boy to die" (383). Instead, she offers him a place to sleep in the barn at Bleak House (to quarantine his illness from the rest of the household): "I asked him to come with us, and we would take care that he had some shelter for the night" (383). Similarly, days later after Jo has be hounded away from Bleak House by Inspector Bucket and finds himself wandering London on the edge of death, Esther's friend (and future husband) Allan Woodcourt finds Jo and takes responsibility for him: feeding him bread, offering him wine to revive him, and finding a lodging for him (which becomes his deathbed). Although Woodcourt's kindness seems simple, the narrative calls particular attention to its difficulty and its novelty. As he walks through London with Jo, Woodcourt muses that "it is surely a strange fact [...] that in the heart of a civilised world this creature in human form should be more difficult to dispose of than an unowned dog" (560). The simple charities that Esther and Woodcourt perform toward Jo are, indeed, unusual acts in the world of *Bleak House*. As such, the narrative seems to offer them as models for responsibility toward the Jos in its world. And indeed, such acts do bring comfort and, finally, a peaceful death to Jo.

But there is something lacking here, something underwhelming or limited about the solutions that the novel proposes to the catastrophe of the London slums. As

much as Esther and Woodcourt's actions are a comfort to Jo and as much as Chancery reform could clear up legal and procedural hurdles to the rehabilitation of London's plague-spots, surely there are other interventions that could do greater good. It is on this question that *Bleak House* seems to falter.

Bleak House is clear that no such meaningful intervention can be expected from the current government. Beyond the morass of Chancery and the broader legal indifference that acquitted Drouet, the novel portrays a government that is entirely irrelevant to the vast majority of its citizens. While Sir Leicester Dedlock frets throughout the novel about various parliamentary difficulties and intrigues, the narrative makes clear that such politics have no real bearing on everyday life in England. Indeed, even when the current governing coalition falls (as it actually did in 1851 while Dickens was writing the novel), no one—beyond Sir Leicester and his fellow lords—seems to notice: "England has been for some weeks in the dismal strait of having no pilot [...] to weather the storm; and the marvellous part of the matter is, that England has not appeared to care very much about it, but has gone on eating and drinking and marrying and giving in marriage" (495-96). The current state of British government is impotent—entirely disconnected from daily life. There is no reason to expect any intervention from the parliamentary system that exists in the *Bleak House*.

However, the question of state intervention is even more complicated here. Despite the novel's pessimism about the current state of Parliament, it is not at all apparent from the narrative what a responsive alternative might look like. As Goodlad notes, the novel "by no means clearly endorses the positive state, nor, indeed, any

other form of institutionalized authority" (526). The underlying problem here, as Goodlad suggests, is Dickens's own ambivalence about "pastorship," the question of what, if anything, the state should do for its citizens.

Dickens's views on state intervention into everyday life are remarkably complex and often seemingly contradictory. He is often read as a critic of utilitarian approaches to reform: the demands of Bentham and his followers for a state that is more efficient, transparent, and willing to intervene to promote the well-being of its citizens. However, as Kathleen Blake suggests, Dickens was clearly in sympathy with utilitarian visions on a number of issues. For example, on the question of public education, Blake notes that "all the utilitarians press for extension of public education. As indicated by *Hard Times*, whatever differences Dickens has with Benthamites over pedagogical particulars, he shares in their support of public education" (7-8). As with the question of sanitary reform, Dickens clearly had expectations that the state can and should intervene in the space of the public. Dickens's commitment to reform necessitated some version of state involvement.

The problem, however, is that Dickens was never quite reconciled to the forms that such involvement or intervention must take. Goodlad argues that the absence of a powerful or comprehensive solution to sanitary reform in *Bleak House* is likely a symptom of Dickens's suspicion of the "technocratic rationality" of Chadwick and other sanitary reformers. A major critique of Chadwick's program for sanitary reform (even one made by those, like Dickens, who seemed to strongly favor such reform) hinged, as Goodlad notes, on the conflict between systematic reform and a

tradition of English liberal individualism. Chadwick's error was "in attempting to introduce modern bureaucratic methods to a nation that had prided and continued to pride itself on the absence of Continental-style governance" (Goodlad 531). Goodlad argues that it is just this resistance to government, to bureaucracy, that dooms any possibility of an organized collective response to the catastrophe that *Bleak House* attempts to discursively construct. She argues that "the novel persistently undermines the modern agencies that might unsettle pernicious deadlock, instead favoring symbolic and impracticable, but suitably British, alternatives" (529). The small charities of Esther and of Woodcourt toward Jo are called to mind here; considering the scope of the problem that the novel presents, such charities indeed approach "symbolic and impracticable."

In his classic reading of the novel, J. Hillis Miller's assessment of the impasse in *Bleak House* is even more general—and more pessimistic. The problem, for him, goes well beyond sanitary or legal reform. He suggests that "the world [of the novel] possesses an immanent tendency toward decomposition which only the most delicately and resolutely applied constructive force can counteract. And it is just this force which is almost totally absent in *Bleak House*" (191). In *Bleak House*, then, the catastrophe is clear, but what—if anything—can be done about it?

Responsibility, Foreign Philanthropy, and the Ethics of Distance

In the second half of this chapter, I move beyond the specific question of sanitary reform to a much broader and perhaps even more vexed question of ethical responsibility in the novel. I consider how *Bleak House* thinks about fundamental

questions about ethical responsibility: who do you owe and what do you owe to them? This question is a necessary though distinct counterpoint to my concerns in the previous section. If, as Ophir suggests, the act of discursive catastrophization has as a goal the production of a sense of "moral urgency," then such moral urgency must depend essentially on the extent to which an actor recognizes moral responsibility for the sufferings of those who are facing catastrophe. The link between discursive catastrophization and moral urgency depends on a sense that one is implicated in a field of responsibility that requires one to intervene. In contemporary discourses of humanitarianism (which I discuss in more detail at the end of this chapter), such a link between catastrophe and an ethical responsibility that requires one to respond is, in a sense, assumed (Fassin *Humanitarian Reason* 181-82). However, the ethical terrain of *Bleak House*—located as it is in an early moment of the development of humanitarian discourse—is much more confounded.[3] In this section, I trace ethical responsibility as it becomes a prime concern in *Bleak House*, as well as the ultimate incoherence or disordering of such responsibility in the narrative.

The conversation about ethical responsibility in *Bleak House* takes place within a field which is delimited, at one pole, by what looks like absolute irresponsibility. The avatar of this worldview is Harold Skimpole, John Jarndyce's friend and frequent houseguest, who is described by Jarndyce with affection as "a perfect child" (64). Though he is even older than Jarndyce (who is himself "nearer

[3] Didier Fassin's genealogy of humanitarianism traces its roots to the abolitionist movement in Britain and France at the end of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth century, as well as to the creation of the Red Cross in second half of the nineteenth century ("Predicament" 38).

sixty than fifty" [60]), Skimpole refuses all responsibility—for his numerous children, for his financial affairs, for any consequences of his actions. Somehow, to Esther's great confusion, Skimpole has managed to free himself from "the duties and accountabilities of life" (66). For John Jarndyce, such childishness is entertaining; Skimpole is a welcome guest for the amusement that he brings, even as he continues to borrow money from Jarndyce and his wards. As Jarndyce explains to Esther, with some joviality, "You can't make *him* responsible. The idea of Harold Skimpole with designs or plans, or knowledge of consequences! Ha, ha, ha!" (74; emphasis in original). Skimpole, far from considering himself an accountable being, also refuses the imputation of responsibility from others; he cannot be made responsible.

While such a characterization surely contains a bit of caricature, a complete denial of responsibility is far from alien to the world of the novel. Skimpole may be a relatively humorous exemplar of irresponsibility (although the amusement that Jarndyce and Esther feel toward him diminishes greatly after he turns Inspector Bucket on Jo and contributes to the bankruptcy of Esther's fellow ward Richard Carstone), but his emptiness as a site of responsibility is an embodiment of the legal irresponsibility that inheres in the institution of Chancery and its representatives. As Mr. Gridley complains, about his ruinous Chancery case,

> I am told, on all hands, it's the system. I musn't look to individuals. It's the system. I musn't go into Court, and say, 'My Lord, I beg to know this from you—is this right or wrong? Have you the face to tell me I have received justice, and therefore am dismissed?' My Lord knows nothing of it. He sits

> there to administer the system. I musn't go to Mr. Tulkinghorn [...]—I musn't say to him, I will have something out of some one for my ruin, by fair means or foul! *He* is not responsible. It's the system. (193)

In this passage, Gridley identifies how responsibility melts away in a bureaucratic culture. Individual responsibility cannot be pinned onto the individuals who constitute an institution; rather, it is the institution that is responsible. However, as Gridley's despair makes clear, such an imputation of responsibility to a system does little good. The general irresponsibility of Mr. Skimpole, then, is a mirror of a more focused, more sinister, and more embedded irresponsibility that is built into the social fabric in the novel.

Such irresponsibility serves as the ground in the novel against which responsible action is thrown into relief. Indeed, the narrative stages a specific and explicit confrontation between Skimpole and Esther on the question of responsibility. To Skimpole's disavowal of responsibility and his insistence that "I never was responsible in my life—I can't be," Esther responds, "I am afraid everybody is obliged to be" (467). This response leads Skimpole to an encomium to Esther's peerless responsibility:

> "Now when you mention responsibility," he resumed, "I am disposed to say, that I never had the happiness of knowing any one whom I should consider so refreshingly responsible as yourself. You appear to me to be the very touchstone of responsibility. When I see you, my dear Miss Summerson, intent upon the perfect working of the whole little orderly system of which

you are the centre, I feel inclined to say to myself—in fact I do say to myself, very often—*that's* responsibility!" (467; emphasis in original)

This moment in the narrative clearly establishes—if the reader has not already realized it—that Esther should be taken as the model of responsibility in the novel. She is the "touchstone." But what does responsibility in this style look like?

The two key words in Skimpole's description of Esther's version of responsibility are "little" and "centre." As I suggested in my description of Esther's interaction with Jo, the scale of her interventions is decidedly minor. Her sphere of influence is circumscribed; her responsibilities are limited to the housekeeping at Bleak House (where she is the keeper of the keys, hence, the "system"), the emotional work of supporting her guardian and fellow wards, as well as some charitable visiting in the surrounding neighborhood. And while I have no desire to diminish the importance of such tasks or the emotional and physical resources required to perform them, it is important to recognize that the scale of Esther's responsibility barely extends outside of her immediate household.

However, the narrative suggests, the limitations of Esther's influence rely on a broader theory of how responsibility to the world comes about and how it can grow. Skimpole's description of Esther at the "centre" of her system is a reference to the understanding that Esther herself seems to have of her obligations. As she describes her sense of responsibility to Mrs. Pardiggle, she argues for a self-imposed limitation: "I thought it best to be as useful as I could, and to render what kind services I could, to those immediately about me; and to try to let that circle of duty gradually and

naturally expand itself" (96). As Bruce Robbins has pointed out, Dickens deploys an apparently similar metaphor in an 1848 article about an expedition to Africa that attempted to disrupt the slave trade (214-15). Dickens argues in "The Niger Expedition" that "the stone that is dropped into the ocean of ignorance at Exeter Hall [a center of religious philanthropy in London], must make its widening circles, one beyond another, until they reach the negro's country in their natural expansion" (123). Robbins argues that Esther is relying on the same metaphor here, that she imagines herself as a stone dropped into the water with the ripples, centered first on her, gradually expanding outward.

It is important, however, to clarify the relation between this metaphor and Esther's understanding of her responsibility. The "dropped stone" metaphor can be read—and Dickens might well want it to be so read—as suggesting a type of diffusion of good or right knowledge from the center point that moves through the social medium like a wave moves through the medium of water. We might even characterize this spreading of knowledge/good as a species of contagion; the right thoughts or motivations at Exeter Hall will spread, from person to person and institution to institution, until they finally reach the shores of Africa. In this reading of the metaphor, knowledge expands, but it is not ultimately limited by the capacity of the moral agent at the center of the widening circles—just as the eventual scope of a cholera epidemic has little to do with the first infected person. After the disease has been passed along, the spread is beyond his or her control. It is clear, however, that this type of metaphor is precisely not what Esther has in mind when she describes her

"circle of duty." Esther's circle, as she suggests, is not entirely circumscribed. It can grow, "gradually and naturally." However, any growth will still remain centered on Esther as the moral agent; if her circle of duty expands, it is because she has realized that she has the capacity (time, energy, money) to assist more people. It is an expansion that is entirely under her control and, indeed, it remains entirely dependent on her agency. It is also, by necessity, limited. It is an ethics of presence, in that it depends entirely on Esther's direct engagement with those around her. One of the tasks of *Bleak House*, then, is not merely to contrast Esther as a "touchstone of responsibility" with Skimpole's utter lack of that apparent virtue, but also to set up an invidious comparison between Esther's ethics of presence and a different model of responsibility: foreign philanthropy.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, philanthropy was a significant force in Victorian culture. In his magisterial history of philanthropy, David Owen argues for an understanding of philanthropy as an English national tradition from the beginning of modernity (2). And although, already by the end of the seventeenth century, an increasing amount of philanthropy had taken the form of contributions pooled into collective charitable organizations, it was "the nineteenth century [that] saw the charitable organization come to full, almost rankly luxuriant, bloom" (92). The explosion in philanthropy in the nineteenth century, Owen argues, is attributable to evangelical energy. As he notes, "so unwearied in well-doing were certain groups of Bible Christians that in the public mind the word 'philanthropist' became all but synonymous with 'evangelical'" (93). These reformers' "zeal knew few bounds,

geographical or topical" (93). Emboldened by the successes of the anti-slavery movement (what Owen lauds as their "their stupendous achievement" [94]), evangelicals turned their attention to other causes beyond the borders of England. And they did so with significant energy and resources. In his register of *The Charities of London in 1861*, Sampson Low tallies a yearly income by voluntary contributions of more than £570,000 for "Foreign Missionary Funds and Societies" (xi). This sum is greater than the yearly income for any of the other categories of philanthropic or charitable enterprise that Low surveyed; indeed, it represents almost a third of the total voluntary contributions to all of the organized charitable institutions in Low's register. These data offer clear support for Owen's assertion that "whether or not missions were philanthropic in essence, at least the support which they enlisted offers an indication of the extent to which Englishmen, especially middle-class Englishmen, would give of their substance to benefit fellow human beings in remote lands" (126). I will bracket (momentarily) the question of the philanthropic value of foreign missions and, slightly rephrasing Owen, suggest that it is clear that a significant percentage of the English population at mid-century felt some pull of ethical responsibility for people who lived elsewhere, far beyond local ethical spheres and circles of duty.

It is just such foreign philanthropy that *Bleak House* skewers mercilessly. The fourth chapter of the novel is entitled "Telescopic Philanthropy." In it, we are introduced by the lawyer Mr. Kenge to Mrs. Jellyby, "a lady of very remarkable strength of character," who "devotes herself entirely to the public" (35). Her attention,

Kenge notes, is currently "devoted to the subject of Africa; with a view to the general cultivation of the coffee berry—*and* the natives—and the happy settlement, on the banks of the African rivers, of our superabundant home population" (35). Mrs. Jellyby's focus on her project is unrelenting; even her eyes, as Esther notes, "had a curious habit of seeming to look a long way off. As if [...] they could see nothing nearer than Africa!" (37). And indeed, she has been absorbed by the project entirely: "the African project at present employs my whole time. It involves me in correspondence with public bodies, and with private individuals anxious for the welfare of the species all over the country. [...] It involves the devotion of all my energies" (38). However, as Esther experiences more of the haphazard Jellyby household, and the way that the Jellyby children (including the one who is allowed to call himself "Peepy") run around unsupervised, she begins to feel doubts about Mrs. Jellyby and her project. As Esther says to her fellow Jarndyce ward Ada, "it *must* be very good of Mrs. Jellyby to take such pains about a scheme for the benefit of the Natives—and yet—Peepy and the housekeeping!" (42; emphasis in original). Charity, for Esther, ought to begin at home.

The novel's caricature of Mrs. Jellyby (and her co-philanthropist Mrs. Pardiggle) is ruthless and offers a comprehensive indictment of foreign philanthropy. The objections are numerous. It is ridiculous and impractical. The reader can only laugh at Mrs. Jellyby's protege Mr. Quale, whose hair seems "ready to fly out of his head in inappeasable philanthropy" (182). His scheme for the Africa project is similarly ridiculous: "teaching the coffee colonists to teach the natives to turn piano-

forte legs and establish an export trade" (41). But there is also a seriousness as to how Mrs. Jellyby's philanthropy is out-of-touch with reality. There is the apparent ineffectiveness of her intervention: a constant stream of letters and documents of questionable importance, "proceedings of ladies' committees, or resolutions of ladies' meetings, [...] others were applications from people excited in various ways about the cultivation of coffee and natives; others required answers" (41). What does it mean, the narrative seems to ask, to be engaged in a philanthropic project in Africa while never even leaving one's own house? And indeed, the African project fails, the novel suggests, because of a misreading of the situation on the ground: "the King of Borrioboola wanting to sell everybody—who survived the climate—for Rum" (768).[4] In addition to all these objections, the novel also, implicitly, raises the question of whether the motive of Mrs. Jellyby's project is actually philanthropic. As Rodger Tarr notes, Dickens was particularly suspicious of "the foreign philanthropy movement, [as] an outgrowth of Evangelicism and the government's interests in overseas development" (276). We can read one thread of this suspicion in the formula that is continually repeated with minor variations, throughout the novel, to describe Mrs. Jellyby's goal: "the cultivation of coffee, and natives." That is to say, that there appears to be a primarily mercantile or commercial purpose driving this ostensibly humanitarian project. In this formulation, always, "the natives" seem to come as an afterthought to a broader project of economic development.

[4] In this detail, Dickens harks back to his description of "The Niger Expedition," in which the attempt to abolish the slave trade along the Niger River fails due to the "falsehood, and deceit" of "King Obi, King Boy, and other such potentates" (109).

Of course, the most devastating indictment that *Bleak House* makes against so-called "telescopic philanthropy" is that it is exactly that: telescopic. It is a concern for others who are at a distance, a concern that overlooks those who are within one's immediate visual field. Mrs. Jellyby's eyes, which are fixed on Africa, cannot see anything nearer. One consequence of this is that Mrs. Jellyby fails to recognize the existence and humanity of those around her. Esther reports that "Mrs. Jellyby was looking far away into Africa straight through my bonnet and head" (296). A Levinas-ian reading of this moment is not necessary to argue that there is an implicit violence in this gaze. Mrs. Jellyby cannot engage with Esther's face, the most visible sign of Esther as a human being. Rather, this refusal of engagement is an ascription of nonbeing, a failure to regard Esther as an ethical subject.

However troubling this moment is, the novel is more concerned with the effect of Mrs. Jellyby's telescopic vision on her immediate "circle of duty." I have already quoted Esther's tentative concern that Mrs. Jellyby may be neglecting her responsibilities to her children and to her home. However, after a longer acquaintance with the Jellybys and the observation of their bankruptcy (caused, it seems, by Mrs. Jellyby's inability to manage her own household), Esther offers her final, firm summation of Mrs. Jellyby: "It struck me that if Mrs. Jellyby had discharged her own natural duties and obligations, before she swept the horizon with a telescope in search of others, she would have taken the best precautions against becoming absurd" (473). Esther marks out a specific set of responsibilities that are "natural" for Mrs. Jellyby. We can no doubt hear an invocation here of the "natural" responsibility of women for

the domestic sphere; however, there is a broader ethical claim here that goes beyond Mrs. Jellyby's "natural" role as a wife and mother. It is also worth considering what the word "absurd" means in this context. Although Mrs. Jellyby is certainly "silly," as is conveyed in one sense of the word "absurd," the first definition from the *Oxford English Dictionary* is more appropriate here: "acting in an incongruous, unreasonable, or illogical manner." By describing Mrs. Jellyby as "absurd," in this sense, Esther is placing her behavior under the domain of logic and reason. Mrs. Jellyby's sense of responsibility, then, is to be judged through a process of moral reasoning.

And indeed, Esther's critique of Mrs. Jellyby's neglect of her duties, the duties of home, is expanded in the novel to a more general principle in the unnamed third-person narrator's accusing disquisition on ethical responsibility as it relates to Jo, moments before his death. The narrator describes Jo:

> He is not one of Mrs. Pardiggle's Tockahoopo Indians; he is not one of Mrs. Jellyby's lambs, being wholly unconnected with Borrioboola-Gha; he is not softened by distance and unfamiliarity; he is not a genuine foreign-grown savage; he is the ordinary home-made article. Dirty, ugly, disagreeable to all the senses, in body a common creature of the common streets, only in soul a heathen. Homely filth begrimes him, homely parasites devour him, homely sores are in him, homely rags are on him: native ignorance, the growth of English soil and climate, sinks his immortal nature lower than the beasts that perish. (564)

In this passage, the narrator demands that we feel ethical responsibility for Jo. The appeal for responsibility relies on an opposition between "foreign-grown" and "home-made." The narrative attempts to reverse what it sees as an incorrect prioritization of moral responsibility as it is distributed across that opposition. The "Tockahoopo Indians" and African natives are deemed worthy of assistance from Mrs. Jellyby, Mrs. Pardiggle, and their ilk, while home-grown Jo—who is equally "savage"—is forgotten and left to die in the streets of London. The narrative makes a case for the "homely" product of "English soil and climate" as demanding responsibility—a responsibility that is more difficult to accept, without the comforts of "distance" and "unfamiliarity." Jo is too real; he makes ethical responsibility a "disagreeable" experience. But it is also his immediate presence that should make the strongest claim on our sense of moral urgency.

The question of distance is at the heart of *Bleak House*'s critique of contemporary ethics. The novel clearly argues for a type of ethical responsibility that is predicated on presence, on a localized circle of duty, and on the concerns of the "home[ly]." As Tarr argues, this is the fundamental critique that *Bleak House* makes about the foreign philanthropy of Mrs. Jellyby: "why should the poor at home have to live under wretched conditions on the verge of starvation, while virtually unknown natives in distant lands benefited from English generosity?" (278). And indeed, as we have seen, one of the primary concerns of *Bleak House* is the catastrophization of the current state of England. Should we not expect this process to be accompanied by a complementary attempt to focus ethical responsibility on exactly those problems?

However, the novel's condemnation of distance ethics is perhaps not quite as decisive as it first appears. Robbins, in particular, has focused on how *Bleak House,* for all its privileging of circumscribed circles of duty and domestic philanthropy, also relies—in some cases—on an ethics of distance. To make this argument, Robbins focuses on the vampiric though "respectable" lawyer Mr. Vholes. Vholes preys on Richard Carstone, encouraging him in his obsession with the Chancery case, all the while collecting legal fees from his increasingly indebted client. Such behavior, the narrator notes, is only to be expected: "the one great principle of English law is, to make business for itself" (482). However, even though such a principle seems ethically suspect, the narrator notes that lawyers like Vholes would counterpose a competing ethical claim to be considered: the interests of Vholes's family. The narrator, with characteristic irony, summarizes the case thusly: "As though, Mr. Vholes and his relations being minor cannibal chiefs, and it being proposed to abolish cannibalism, indignant champions were to put the case thus: Make man-eating unlawful, and you starve the Vholeses!" (483). As Robbins notes, this case places the ethics of domestic responsibility (Vholes's responsibility toward his family) in conflict with a general principle that would affect all of society, though at a distance. And it is clear, from the ridicule in the narrator's metaphor of Vholes as a "cannibal chief," which ethical claim should prevail. In this moment, Robbins argues, "it is not proximate ethics but distant politics, Dickens' narrator declares, that should be decisive" (223). Robbins suggests here that, at least in some cases, *Bleak House*

recognizes that a certain distance is necessary in order to prevent ethical responsibility from becoming antisocial.

I agree that *Bleak House* does not succeed (or, perhaps, does not want to succeed) in its condemnation of distance ethics, of distant claims of responsibility. But my tack here is different from Robbins's; I question whether the narrative ever fully manages to differentiate between an ethics of proximity and an ethics of distance. My impulse here is broadly deconstructive, though not rigidly so. My argument hinges on the rhetorical strategy by which the novel attempts to privilege the local/home pole of the foreign vs. domestic opposition. We have already seen an example of the narrative's strategy in the passage in which Jo is compared to the foreign charges of Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellyby. As the narrator notes, "[Jo] is not a genuine foreign-grown savage; he is the ordinary home-made article" (564). By constructing Jo as a "home-made" "savage," the narrative attempts to repatriate foreign-directed ethical responsibility back to the local soil of England. The rhetorical comparison here is meant to refocus a sense of responsibility, to move away from the telescopic to the immediate. The responsibility that is directed toward savages elsewhere can and should be redirected to the savages who walk among us. If one desires to help savages, the narrative suggests, one needs look no further than Jo.

However, in this act of comparison, the exemplar of "home" himself becomes foreign. Jo may be a "home-made" savage, but he is also, in a very important sense, a foreigner in England. The narrative describes in detail Jo's experience in the city, noting how his understanding of the world around him must be "strange":

> To shuffle through the streets, unfamiliar with the shapes, and in utter darkness as to the meaning, of those mysterious symbols, so abundant over the shops, and at the corners of streets, and on the doors, and in the windows! To see people read, and to see people write, and to see the postmen deliver letters, and not to have the least idea of all that language—to be, to every scrap of it, stone blind and dumb! It must be very puzzling to see this good company going to the churches on Sundays, with their books in their hands, and to think (for perhaps Jo *does* think at odd times) what does it all mean, and if it means anything to anybody, how comes it that it means nothing to me? (198)

In this passage, Jo's experience is that of a foreign visitor to England. He cannot read the signs. But his foreignness here is not simply a matter of his illiteracy. He also attempts to make sense (but cannot) of the customs he sees around him: "what does it all mean[?]" And although Jo's experience of London is not entirely foreign (he does, after all, speak the language even if he cannot read it), this passage still works to create a sense of how exotic and incomprehensible everyday life in London appears to Jo—and, reciprocally, how exotic and incomprehensible Jo himself is as compared to a model British subject.

The novel's identification of the local as foreign creates a rhetorical space of equivalency between these two seemingly disparate constructs. However, this logic is not limited to the novel's understanding of Jo. The narrative goes even further here, making an explicit equivalency between the neglected children of English philanthropists and the colonial subjects that those very philanthropists desire to help.

When Esther first meets Mrs. Pardiggle, the benefactor of the "Tockahoopo Indians," a complement of Pardiggle children are also present. Esther calls attention to their apparent neglect, observing that

> we had never seen such dissatisfied children. It was not merely that they were weazen and shrivelled—though they were certainly that too—but they looked absolutely ferocious with discontent. At the mention of the Tockahoopo Indians, I could really have supposed Egbert to be one of the most baleful members of that tribe, he gave me such a savage frown. The face of each child [...] darkened in a peculiarly vindictive manner, but his was by far the worst. (94)

Esther's intention here is to call attention to the mistreatment of Mrs. Pardiggle's own children as an indictment of her abdication of certain domestic responsibilities. However, Esther's rhetoric here actually makes the Pardiggle children into Tockahoopo Indians. Their white faces are even "darkened" by the presence of their mother.

A similar, and perhaps even more troubling equivalency, is made in the novel between Mrs. Jellyby's long-suffering daughter Caddy and the focus of Mrs. Jellyby's ineffective benevolence, African slaves. Caddy, who Mrs. Jellyby forces to work as her amanuensis, complains bitterly to Esther: "I have no peace of my life. Talk of Africa! I couldn't be worse off if I was a what's-his-name—man and a brother!" (166). Caddy's garbled reference here is to the phrase "Am I not a man and brother?" As Rachel Teukolsky notes, this question "captioned the ubiquitous icon from British

and American anti-slavery propaganda, first appearing on a 'slave medallion' manufactured by Wedgwood in the late eighteenth century, which depicted a kneeling, manacled slave" (496). And indeed, if Caddy's implication were not clear, moments later she declares to Esther that "I won't be a slave all my life" (167). There is no question that such an explicit equivalency elides the most essential differences between Caddy Jellyby and actual African slaves; there is no defense of the rhetorical comparison here. Rather, I want to point out how such a comparison (as offensive as it may be) contaminates the category of the local with the foreign. As a rhetorical strategy, it is intended to discredit the eminently discreditable foreign philanthropists. However, what it also offers is the possibility of the collapse of the ability to separate the local from the distant.

There are two significant consequences that can be drawn out of this contamination of the domestic by the foreign. First, this contamination undermines the narrative's strenuous attempts to privilege one type of ethical responsibility over another. If the responsibility that underlies foreign philanthropy is equivalent to the responsibility that drives ethical action within a circumscribed "circle of duty," if both foreign and domestic subjects demand the same ethical urgency, then how can we justify one modality of philanthropy over the other? We can still criticize the effectiveness or wisdom of the specific interventions of Mrs. Jellyby and her ilk, of course. But it is not clear that we can question their ethical orientation toward the distant other. *Bleak House*, in this way, runs into a contradiction between an explicit and an implicit critique of responsibility. The explicit critique argues for a

preferential ethical status for the local and the domestic. The implicit critique, in contrast, is rooted in an anxiety that the distinction cannot be made—the anxiety that an ethical subject might be responsible for everyone, no matter their distance.

With this anxiety, *Bleak House* runs up against "*le scandale*" of ethics identified by Jacques Derrida. For Derrida, ethical responsibility is a singular relationship with every other, a responsibility to each other being (both person and animal). The problem, however, is that such a responsibility is, in an important way, impossible. One can respond to one other, but "*il y a aussi des autres, en nombre infini, la généralité innombrable des autres, auxquels devrait me lier la même responsabilité, une responsabilité générale et universelle [...]. Je ne peux répondre à l'appel, à la demande, à la obligation, ni même à l'amour d'un autre sans lui sacrificier l'autre autre, les autres autres*" ("there are also others, an infinite number, the innumerable generality of others who should be bound to me by the same responsibility, a general and universal responsibility. I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, nor even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others"; *Donner* 98; my translation). The scandal here, then, is that by responding to one ethical claim—by being responsible to one other—one must forego the possibility of responding to any number of other ethical claims (from "*la généralité innombrable des autres*"). Ethical responsibility is infinite, but our ability to respond is sadly, appallingly finite. For Derrida, such a "scandal" is the experience of our everyday life. He gives an example from his own life:

En préférant ce que je fais ici à l'instant, ne fût-ce qu'en lui accordant du temps et de l'attention, en choisissant mon travail, mon activité de citoyen ou de philosophie professoral et professionel, écrivant ou parlant ici dans un langue publique qui se trouve être le français, je fais peut-être mon devoir. Mais je sacrifie, les trahissant à chaque instant, toutes mes autres obligations : à l'égard des autres autres que je ne connais pas ou que je connais, des milliards des mes <<semblables>> (sans parler des animaux qui sont encore plus des autres que mes semblables) qui meurent de faim ou de maladie. Je trahis ma fidélité ou mes obligations à l'égard d'autres concitoyens, à l'égard de ceux qui ne parlent pas ma langue et auxquels je ne parle ni ne réponds, [...] aussi à l'égard de ceux que j'aime en privé, les miens, ma famille, mes fils [...], chacun étant sacrifié à chacun sur cette terre de Moriah qui est notre habitat de tous les jours et de chaque seconde. (*Donner* 98-99)

By preferring what I am doing here at this moment, if only in giving it time and attention, by choosing my work as a citizen or as a philosopher professor and professional, writing and speaking here in a public language, French, I am perhaps doing my duty. But I am sacrificing, betraying at every moment, all of my other obligations: in regard to the other others who I do or do not, know, the billions of my "fellows" (not to mention the animals that are even more others than my fellows) who are dying of hunger or sickness. I betray my fidelity or my obligations in regard to other citizens, to those who do not speak my language and those to whom I neither speak nor respond, [...] also to

> those who I love in private, those who are mine, my family, my sons [...], every being sacrificed to every other in this land of Moriah that is our habitat every day and in each second. (my translation)

The reference to Moriah in this passage is a reference to Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac—for Derrida, a key moment in the understanding of the incommensurability of ethical responsibility. What is essential in this passage is the response that Derrida proposes to the "scandal" that is ethical responsibility. If every ethical response—every duty or obligation fulfilled—requires the sacrifice of all other responsibility, this does not mean that ethical responsibility can be ignored. Derrida's reading of responsibility may seem to be a prescription for ethical paralysis, but it is not. As he illustrates in this example, one cannot fail to accept ethical responsibility, even though by doing so it means failing or betraying innumerable others. The scandal here is not that one cannot behave ethically; rather, one cannot justify one's choice of which other to be responsible for. Derrida argues that "*que je le veuille ou non, je ne pourrai jamais justifier que je préfère ou que je sacrifie l'un (un autre) à l'autre*" ("whether I like it or not, I could never justify that I prefer or that I sacrifice the one (an other) to another"; *Donner* 101; my translation).

For Derrida, there is no privileged ethical position from which one could determine which responsibility is more urgent, which claim—among the innumerable—one must respond to. To return to *Bleak House*, Mrs. Jellyby, in taking responsibility for some others (though ineffectively, for which we can criticize her), is being irresponsible toward other others, specifically, her family and her domestic

responsibilities. But what the Derridean logic of responsibility—a logic that I have argued inheres in the way that the novel considers competing claims of ethical responsibility—requires is that Esther and others like her, in behaving responsibly to a "circle of duty" are also behaving irresponsibly toward those others who are outside of that immediate circle.

We can get a sense of the uneasiness of this reversal of perspective at the end of the novel when Esther reports on the final years of Harold Skimpole. After Skimpole's death, Esther notes, his diary was published, which made some small impression on the public, being "considered very pleasant reading" (729). However, Esther notes that "I never read more of it myself than the sentence on which I chanced to light on opening the book. It was this. '[John] Jarndyce, in common with most other men I have known, is the Incarnation of Selfishness'" (729). In the novel, John Jarndyce is a philanthropist in the local model of Esther; a man who does as much good as he can, quietly, for the people around him, including Skimpole himself (he also, we are told, contributes to several more distant philanthropic concerns).

For this reason, Esther is clearly offended by the irresponsible Skimpole's accusation. Similarly, the reader can take this moment as irony; it reveals the extent to which Skimpole misunderstands responsibility and philanthropy. Yet, if we read this sentence without irony, it offers the troubling suggestion that John Jarndyce may well, even despite his commitment to being responsible, be considered selfish. And indeed, it is just such an epithet that we could deploy to describe the outcome of any ethical decision that chooses among competing responsibilities with no possible way

of justifying the final choice. Choosing to be responsible to one's family, from the perspective of distance, may appear to be selfish. Conversely, choosing to be responsible to a distant public, from the perspective from one's immediate family, may appear to be the same. In the end, then, there is a moment in *Bleak House* where the narrative itself offers a potential moment of recognition of ethical undecidability. One can continue to read foreign philanthropy as irresponsible and John Jarndyce as unfairly maligned by Skimpole. But one can also read here the novel's ambivalence about those conclusions.

There is a second consequence of the novel's inability to keep the distant and the local separate. When the novel allows the foreign to contaminate the domestic, such as in the references to English children as savages, Indians, or slaves, the comparisons all go in one direction. In each of these cases, the metaphor serves to make the domestic more foreign; at no point does the novel reverse this comparison in an attempt to make the distant more local. This means that *Bleak House* constructs a model of responsibility in which all responsibility is distant and all philanthropy is, in an important sense, foreign philanthropy. Throughout the novel, there is a distance built into the philanthropic act, a gulf between the ethical subject and the other to whom he or she is obligated. Indeed, Esther remarks on this distance in her description of visiting the poor with Ada and Mrs. Pardiggle. She notes that "Ada and I were really uncomfortable. We both felt intrusive and out of place [...]. We both felt painfully sensible that between us and these people there was an iron barrier, which could not be removed by [Mrs. Pardiggle]" (99). Although Esther does not here resort

to a metaphor in which distance is foreign or the poor are savages, it is clear that even "local" philanthropy (as, indeed, Esther is within her sphere of influence at Bleak House in this moment) is not an act that based on a sense of underlying closeness or understanding. An "iron barrier" is interposed between Esther and the subjects (objects?) of her ethical intervention, such that she feels "out of place" so close to her home.

This distance, and its inherence in ethical responsibility in the novel, anticipates a difficulty in modern humanitarian discourse. According to Didier Fassin, contemporary humanitarianism is founded on a "remarkable paradox" (*Humanitarian Reason* 3) He examines the ways that a humanitarian "politics of compassion" relies on two different and potentially conflicting discourses:

> On the one hand, moral sentiments are focused mainly on the poorest, most unfortunate, most vulnerable individuals: the politics of compassion is a politics of inequality. On the other hand, the condition of possibility of moral sentiments is generally the recognition of others as fellows: the politics of compassion is a politics of solidarity. The tension between inequality and solidarity, between a relation of domination and a relation of assistance, is constitutive of all humanitarian government. (3)

We can see versions of both of these discourses play out in *Bleak House*'s ambivalence about the ethics of distance. We can consider the profusion of responsibility that comes with a Derridean reading of overwhelming ethical responsibility as akin to a politics of solidarity. Although Derrida would certainly be

suspicious of the humanism that drives much of the politics of compassion, the result of his ethical analysis is still that one is responsible to the ethical claims of billions of one's "*semblables*" (which I have translated as "fellows"). Whether or not this is actually solidarity (and it is hard to imagine Derrida using that word), the result would seem to be the same. Whether one relies on a Derridean ethics or on a contemporary politics of solidarity, responsibility in *Bleak House* is a claim that is made on us by all others, both foreign and domestic.

Similarly, a version of Fassin's "politics of inequality" is driving the tendency in *Bleak House* to view the ethical relationship as one of distance and/or foreign-ness. Telescopic philanthropy is ethical responsibility as adopted from a position of power: economic, political, epistemological. The relationship in telescopic philanthropy (and in all philanthropy marked by a type of distance) is an unequal one. If all philanthropy is telescopic, then all philanthropy exists in a relationship of inequality. In this way, much of the anxiety about responsibility in *Bleak House* is an anticipation of conflicts between discourses that will authorize responsibility for the next one hundred and fifty years.

What does it mean to invoke contemporary humanitarianism as a lens through which we can ultimately read *Bleak House*? Such a discourse is well-nigh hegemonic at the beginning of our twenty-first century. As Fassin notes, in the last twenty years, "humanitarianism has gained a form of understandable but also questionable moral intangibility. The superior virtue it represents has made it untouchable. We are all

convinced of the good it does for the world" ("Predicament" 46). Humanitarian reason has become, in this moment, "so consensual" that it largely defines the space for any response to catastrophe (Fassin "Predicament" 40). For this reason, this chapter—despite its focus on texts from the nineteenth century—unfolds within a fundamentally contemporary discourse. The disasters I discuss in this chapter and the response to them fall under the shadow of disasters that you and I have experienced in the last decade.

And how could this not be the case? Humanitarianism is how we now think about ethical response to catastrophe. I, like many others, have made what have become, sadly, annual contributions (small though they were) to the Red Cross in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, the 2011 tsunami in Japan, Hurricane Sandy in 2012, and Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013. As Fassin suggests, "we have become used to the global spectacle of suffering and the global display of succor" (*Humanitarian Reason* ix). It is difficult to not transpose these contemporary visions into the past. We feel ourselves engaged by Digby, as he demands relief for the famine victims in India. We as readers, I suspect, become significantly invested in sanitary reform in *Bleak House*. However, the type of discursive catastrophization that produces these types of events as catastrophes—as well as the humanitarian reason that prescribes a specific response—are political processes that create certain possibilities while eliding others. In this coda, I briefly remark upon the elisions in this chapter.

To do so, I return to the distinction that I describe in the Introduction between catastrophe as an event and catastrophe as a chronic state of affairs. Recall that this distinction was adapted by Slavoj Žižek from Terry Eagleton's work on tragedy. Žižek differentiates between "the big, spectacular catastrophic Event, the abrupt irruption from some other world, and the dreary persistence of a hopeless condition, the blighted existence that goes on indefinitely" (165). To clearly mark the different catastrophic modalities, recall that Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo distinguishes between them using "big C" and "small c"; he "deploy[s] Catastrophe to describe and signify spectacular and extraordinary events, and catastrophe for *longue durée*, dreary conditions and structures that are cast as non-events" ("Antinomies" 213). What matters for my purposes in this moment is that Catastrophe can overshadow or erase catastrophe. A Catastrophe, as an event, can create a sense of discontinuity, a discontinuity that prevents a full understanding of the history or context of that very event. As Vázquez-Arroyo argues, "[b]y [...] privileging the visibility of the catastrophic Event, the invocation of past *C*atastrophes tends to occlude the more routine, normalized catastrophes. Similarly, the catastrophic and catastrophizing aspects of the present [...] could be rendered invisible by the expectation of the *C*atastrophe" ("How Not to Learn" 746; emphasis in original). Vázquez-Arroyo's point here is that the Catastrophe as an event—either in the past or as impending from the future, or even, perhaps, in the present—serves as a focal point which draws attention from both smaller, ongoing catastrophes and from the catastrophizing process that is producing the Catastrophe. In this chapter, I focused on the latter part

of this process, using Ophir's conception of discursive catastrophization to highlight the ongoing processes that produce a Catastrophic event. I have suggested that both Digby and Dickens engage in discursive catastrophization as a way of explaining (Digby) or predicting (Dickens) Catastrophic events (famine and epidemic, respectively).

However, as Vázquez-Arroyo suggests, the process of catastrophization (both discursive and objective) as described by Ophir is not the same as catastrophe with a "small c"—as an experience of ongoing, chronic evil. Vázquez-Arroyo suggests that it is a focus on Catastrophes, both as punctual events and even as the result of meticulously outlined discursive catastrophization, that interfere with the recognition of catastrophes. Of course, as Vázquez-Arroyo notes, catastrophe and Catastrophe are not necessarily unrelated; one may contribute to the other and it is possible to recognize that. The question then becomes "how *C*atastrophes either render visible or conceal catastrophes, objective processes of catastrophization, and crises" ("How Not to Learn" 746-47; emphasis in original). In my analyses in this chapter, I have explored the relationship between Catastrophes and the discursive constructions of the "objective processes of catastrophization." But what of catastrophe with a "small c"?

The ongoing, mostly unspoken and concealed catastrophe that runs beneath the surface of the readings in this chapter is, unsurprisingly, colonialism. If we consider colonialism as part of a broader project of capitalism, then we can consider this constellation as the ongoing, everyday catastrophe that underlies the concerns of

both Digby and Dickens. The famines in India were a Catastrophe, as Digby rightly notes; however, the catastrophe was the colonial project that produced both spectacular events such as the famines as well as the everyday, chronic exploitation, immiseration, and murder of a colonial population. Similarly, for Dickens, cholera and epidemic disease were a Catastrophe, a catastrophe caused, proximally, by a lack of sanitation in the metropolis; and yet, the colonial logic that governed the relation of the British government to its own domestic poor (a logic that is also hinted at in *Bleak House*'s identification of the English poor with colonial subjects) was the catastrophe that haunts both the Catastrophe and the discursive catastrophization here. We can see this elision as well in *Bleak House*'s struggles with foreign philanthropy and ethical responsibility. Although the novel identifies no specific catastrophe that has befallen or that will befall the Tockahoopo Indians or the natives of Borrioboola-Gha (except, in the latter case, a passing reference to slavery), it also never raises the question of who or what has created the need of these Native Americans and Africans for assistance. Britain's historical complicity in the slave trade and in the displacement of the indigenous peoples of North America—whether imagined as catastrophe or Catastrophe (or both)—remains in the background here. The attentiveness to Catastrophe, the moral urgency of discursive catastrophization, and the anxiety about ethical responsibility all take place in these texts against an unacknowledged background of catastrophe.

It is even more complicated than this. The discourses of catastrophization and ethical responsibility that are employed in *Bleak House* collude in the production of

the catastrophe of colonialism. Although I have read philanthropy as an act that is produced by a recognition of an ethical responsibility to an other, that does not necessarily make the resulting actions ethical. My analyses have relied on a distinction between ethical motivation and the resulting act. Mrs. Jellyby's desire to halt the slave trade is an acceptance of ethical responsibility; her scheme to do so via an imperialistic commercial venture participates in a catastrophe. She is not alone. Patrick Brantlinger argues that

> applied to Africa, [...] humanitarianism did point insistently toward imperialism. By the 1860s the success of the antislavery movement, the impact of the great Victorian explorers, and the merger in the social sciences or racist and evolutionary doctrines had combined, and the public widely shared a view of Africa which demanded imperialism on moral, religious, and scientific grounds. [174]

Unsurprisingly, it is a similar amalgamation of religious, humanitarian, and commercial interests that drives the Jellyby scheme in *Bleak House*. The motivations for the British colonial project in India were similarly missionary and even more horribly ambitious. As Eric Stokes famously noted, "the missionaries of English civilization in India stood openly for a policy of 'assimilation'. Britain was to stamp her image upon India" (xiii). That such a policy could be justified with recourse to an Evangelical program of "social reform," did not mean that it did not also serve as a cover for the utilitarian schemes of "Free Trade" that enriched England at the expense of the Indian colony (Stokes xiv). Nor was the violence inherent in this program

necessarily hidden from the British public, a public that could be remarkably bloodthirsty when it came to catastrophe in India. Even Dickens, despite his apparent preference of the late 1840s and early 1850s to ignore distant humanitarian claims (in the hopes, we have seen, that knowledge and civilization might eventually expand to these places on their own, like ripples in water), would become, in the wake of the Indian Mutiny of 1857, an advocate of brutal imperialistic intervention in the colonies. Brantlinger synthesizes Dickens's writings from this period in a scathing indictment: "Dickens's sympathy for the downtrodden poor at home is reversed abroad, translated into approval of imperial domination and even, if necessary, of the liquidation by genocide of 'niggers' and 'natives'" (207). The Dickens of *Bleak House*, an outraged chronicler of discursive catastrophization at home and an ambivalent theorist of ethical responsibility, would soon after become an advocate for the perpetuation and expansion of imperial catastrophe.

Nor has contemporary humanitarianism escaped the entanglement with the temptations of imperialism. Response to Catastrophe can still serve as a cover for the installation or preservation of catastrophe. Fassin admits that "there is often a form of cynicism at play when one deploys the language of moral sentiments at the same time as implementing policies that increase social inequality, measures that restrict the rights of immigrant populations, or military operations with essentially geostrategic goals" (*Humanitarian Reason* 2). However, whether humanitarianism is deployed cynically or sincerely, it remains necessary to be attentive to the ways our contemporary response to catastrophic events can serve to obfuscate moral

responsibility and hinder recognition of both catastrophization and other, less spectacular catastrophes. Humanitarianism provides a framework for understanding our relationship to catastrophe and its victims, however, we must continue to interrogate it as a basis for ethical responsibility in an increasingly catastrophic world.

EPILOGUE

Disaster, the Anthropocene, and the End

"Novels, then, have beginnings, ends, and potentiality, even if the world does not" (138).
—Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*.

In April of 2014, as I was finishing this dissertation, the composer John Luther Adams won the Pulitzer Prize for a composition entitled *Become Ocean*, an extraordinary forty-two minute piece for orchestra.[1] I find the piece to be both riveting and unsettling—evocative of an (almost paradoxical) undulating solidity. The power in Adams's composition is drawn, critics have suggested, from his specific commitments to time and place. As a composer, Adams is very much linked to a particular landscape: Alaska, where he has lived since moving there in the late 1970s to campaign for the Alaska Lands Act (Ross *Listen* 181). Alex Ross has argued that Adams's music is rooted firmly in "the geography, ecology, and native culture of Alaska" (*Listen* 178). And indeed, the central concern in *Become Ocean* is one that has particular urgency for the Arctic—though its relevance extends well beyond those latitudes.

Become Ocean is music of climate change. The Pulitzer citation for Adams's composition describes "a haunting orchestral work that suggests a relentless tidal surge, evoking thoughts of melting polar ice and rising sea levels" ("2014 Pulitzer"). The representational commitment of the work becomes even more explicit in Adams's

[1] The piece has yet to be commercially recorded. A live performance from Carnegie Hall in May can be heard here: http://www.wqxr.org/#!/story/ny-premiere-john-luther-adamss-become-ocean/

own notes. As Ross observes, Adams draws the title from a line by John Cage, but repurposes it; Adams writes on the score that "[l]ife on this earth first emerged from the sea. As the polar ice melts and sea level rises, we humans find ourselves facing the prospect that once again we may quite literally become ocean" (Ross "Water Music" 92). Although Adams's note on the score suggests some uncertainty ("we may") about the outcome of the melting ice caps, the marking at the top of the score itself is unequivocal about the outcome: "Inexorable" (Ross "Water Music" 92). *Become Ocean* is an evocation of a certain type of future: the future of a drowned world. It is a vision of an apocalypse—one that is slow but inexorable. And as Ross effuses, "[i]t may be the loveliest apocalypse in musical history" (92).[2]

I want to suggest that *Become Ocean* belongs to a tradition of what Frank Kermode has called "fictions of the End—[...]ways in which, under varying existential pressures, we have imagined the ends of the world" (5). Writing in the nineteen-sixties, Kermode is interested in diagnosing a cultural preoccupation with apocalypse, by placing it into a long literary and cultural genealogy. Despite the nuclear threat of the period and its historical novelty, Kermode recognizes a continuity in visions of apocalypse: "We have our Terrors, and specific images of them, though [...] these do not distinguish us essentially from other apocalyptists"

[2] It is also one of the few specifically materialist apocalypses in music history. Unsurprisingly, most musical apocalypses have traditionally been conceived of within a theological or mythological framework (e.g., Richard Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, Olivier Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, or the final movement of Gustav Mahler's second symphony).

(99). Whatever the "Terrors" of the atomic age, Kermode suggests, there is no fundamental difference between apocalyptic anxieties.

However, Kermode's project here is not primarily to provide a genealogy of apocalyptic fictions, but, more importantly, to isolate the impulse behind their creation. For Kermode, a vision of apocalypse may well inhere in any glimpse into the future, in any period: "It seems to be a condition attaching to the exercise of thinking about the future that one should assume one's own time to stand in an extraordinary relation to it. The time is not free, it is a slave of a mythical end" (94). Kermode identifies a broadly egotistical habit of thought—a habit to consider oneself and one's own time to be "extraordinary" in relation to what is to come. His own orientation here is one of suspicion, rooted in a rationalism that refuses to recognize any specific historical situation as "extraordinary" or novel. Kermode identifies here the "apocalyptic tone" that I noted earlier in Blanchot (and others), however, he refuses to grant that it corresponds to any truly apocalyptic event. Kermode's "sense of an ending" (98) is purely rhetorical—it does not presage any actual ending. Rather, the impulse to see the End as near is, for Kermode, an unfortunate (and, often, embarrassing) mistake that stems from our desire to place ourselves in a meaningful narrative. It is also, he suggests, unavoidable: "[p]robably the most sophisticated of us is capable at times of naive reactions to the End" (9). It is too easy, even for "the most sophisticated," to be caught up in fictions of the End.

This dissertation, in certain ways, reflects that very temptation—even, at times, falling comfortably into a *ton apocalyptique*. Disasters, in most of the texts that

I have read, are imaginations of ends. Many of these ends occur on a small scale, affecting only a handful of people, e.g., railway accidents or the flood that kills the Tullivers. But it is also true that some of the disastrous ends I have considered cross over and become Ends. Cuvier's next geological catastrophe, Zola's acute anxiety about the future of France, and the epidemics and famines that made ethical demands on Victorian subjects: these are all destructions on a larger scale, destructions that happen to a collective, destructions that begin to suggest the possibility of an End of (some version of) the world. These are disasters that approach and interact with Kermode's apocalyptic tradition. Although Cuvier would not recognize the mechanisms (nuclear devastation, anthropogenic climate change) that drive our current apocalyptic anxieties, there is no question that he could assimilate their potential effects into his geological narrative. In this dissertation, narratives of disaster participate—sometimes tonally, sometimes explicitly—in a discourse of apocalypticism.

The narratives and novels that I have explored in this dissertation can be read as a dark mirror of what Fredric Jameson has called "the providential novel" (216). Jameson identifies the providential novel as a realist novel with a "happy ending," a novel that seems to suggest that a kind of providence (not necessarily explicitly theological) has taken responsibility for the outcome of the narrative (195). He notes that, over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (the era of realism), something about such novels changes: "we must also recall the fundamental shift, in the evolution of this kind of novel, from the question of individual salvation to the

interweaving of many plots and many destinies" (222). This attention to the imbrication of plots and destinies, Jameson argues, produces a "shift from diachronic responsibility—an attention to the salvation of the individual—to [a] synchronic vision" (227). This synchronic vision attempts to take in all narratives at once, to capture the ways in which not one character, but rather multiple characters or perhaps even an entire social formation, can be saved. Or rather, in the case of the narratives that I have been reading, the ways in which multiple characters or a social formation can be destroyed. This is the alternative to the providential narrative in its synchronic form. The disaster novel can become a narrative of synchronic destruction, attentive to how multiple plots and destinies intertwine and, ultimately, end in catastrophe.

As *Become Ocean* reminds us, we are living in just such a synchronic vision of the end as a collective apocalypse approaches—one which will put an end to an entire world of individual plots and destinies. At this moment, it hardly seems naive to buy into such a narrative. Kermode's sophisticated observer need not be embarrassed about fearing the approach of this End. That it is coming seems increasingly less in doubt. The latest news—which broke only several weeks ago—suggests that the collapse of the Antarctic ice sheets has accelerated to the point of becoming "irreversible" (Gillis and Chang A1). This places us in what Kermode has called "an End-dominated age of transition"(14). The End has not yet arrived, but we can already anticipate it. With each new report of climatological data, we can sense its approach.

In recent years, scholars in the social sciences and humanities have taken to calling our "age of transition" the Anthropocene. The term was proposed by Nobel laureate Paul J. Crutzen as a way of separating our modern geological present from the previous era, the Holocene. Crutzen argues that "[t]he Anthropocene could be said to have started in the latter part of the eighteenth century, when analyses of air trapped in polar ice showed the beginning of growing global concentrations of carbon dioxide and methane. This date also happens to coincide with James Watt's design of the steam engine in 1784" (23). Crutzen's point here (and his justification for distinguishing our current epoch from the previous one) is that the primary geological force on earth at this point is humans—particularly (but not solely) in terms of our carbon dioxide emissions.[3] The Industrial Revolution has produced a significant, wide-reaching effect on planetary systems that had previously seemed completely independent of human life.

In a sense, the emergence of the Anthropocene is a shadow that haunts the readings in this dissertation. Indeed, it would be possible to read the history of the nineteenth century—a history of industrialization and disaster—in relation to an unacknowledged narrative of human intervention on a geological scale. Such a reading would not be entirely proleptic. Nineteenth-century science provided a number of early indications of the potential for human interference on a grand scale. By the late 1850s, John Tyndall was conducting experiments that established the

[3] Crutzen cites several other human interventions that have had large-scale effects on the planet's geology since the late eighteenth century, including massive population growth, expanded agriculture, deforestation, and dam building/river diversion (23).

heat-trapping effects of water vapor and carbon dioxide (called, at the time, "carbonic acid") in the atmosphere. His work provided the theoretical apparatus for understanding the effects of what we now call greenhouse gases, and—in an 1861 lecture—he offers a significant warning:

> the differential action of the heat coming from the sun to the earth, and that radiated from the earth into space, is vastly augmented by the aqueous vapour of the atmosphere. [...] Similar remarks would apply to the carbonic acid diffused through the air, while an almost inappreciable admixture of any of the stronger hydrocarbon vapours would powerfully hold back the terrestrial rays and produce corresponding climactic changes. (39-40)

These early suggestions of the potential for climate change would be expanded upon by Svante Arrhenius later in the century. By 1896, in a paper examining the influence of carbon dioxide on variations in climate, Arrhenius clearly recognizes that coal contains significant amounts of carbon that would enter the atmosphere as carbon dioxide when burned (270). Nor was nineteenth-century recognition of human geological action confined solely to the realm of climatology. As Crutzen notes, an Italian geologist, Antonio Stoppani, had coined the phrase "anthropozoic era" as early as 1873 (23).

Indeed, there is a way in which the Anthropocene is an extension—though a radical one—of Georges Cuvier's project. In Chapter 1, I suggested that Cuvier's motivation was to place human history and geological history on the same timeline, to bring geostory into the realm of human time. In the Anthropocene, a version of

Cuvier's ambition is realized (though not necessarily in a way that he would have recognized). As Dipesh Chakrabarty notes, in our own time "the distinction between human and natural histories [...] has begun to collapse" (207). Human history becomes geological history when humans become "geological agents" (Chakrabarty 207). In this sense, it is not just that geology and history are converging; rather, it is that humans are now, to a large extent, writing geological history. If we are living in a fiction of the End (to return to Kermode's phrase), it is because we have now made the world into a novel. Specifically: a disaster novel. It is no longer just that a logic of disaster provides a narrative for our contemporary self-understanding—a condition that Kermode identified almost fifty years ago. Rather, it is now the case that humans have actively altered the physical world in such a way as to reproduce that disastrous logic in the physical world itself. We have emplotted—geologically—the end of the world.

Despite the novelty of the Anthropocene, our understanding of it remains structured in part by the two strands of disaster discourse that I identified in my Introduction. We have already encountered the apocalyptic intimations of John Luther Adams and we are familiar with proclamations like Mike Davis's assertion that "[o]ur world, our old world that we have inhabited for the last 12,000 years, has ended" ("Living" para. 1). Yet, at the same time, the fact of our own agency in geological change seems to demand an Enlightenment response, a response that is focused on averting the disaster through specific types of social intervention. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer have suggested such a program:

> To develop a world-wide accepted strategy leading to sustainability of ecosystems against human induced stresses will be one of the great future tasks of mankind, requiring intensive research efforts and wise application of the knowledge thus acquired in the noösphere, better known as knowledge or information society. An exciting, but also difficult and daunting task lies ahead of the global research and engineering community [...]. (18)

Crutzen and Stoermer envision a specifically scientific intervention. They call for a focus on problem-solving driven by a community of scientists and other participants in the "knowledge or information society." Such a community is not far removed from the social scientific communities that have developed to confront disasters in the wake of the Lisbon earthquake. In the light of rationality, the Anthropocene becomes a disaster that can be managed and its worst effects potentially averted.

The discourses of disaster prevention/management and unavoidable apocalypse come together in the "*catastrophisme éclairé*" of Jean-Pierre Dupuy ("enlightened catastrophism"; *Catastrophisme* 9).[4] Dupuy attempts a kind of synthesis of technocratic/political responses to disaster and the apocalyptic discourses of looming catastrophe. Dupuy's *catastrophisme* describes an orientation toward a future in which catastrophe is certain. For Dupuy, the apocalypse of climate change is, in a sense, axiomatic. We must accept that it will happen. And yet, for Dupuy, there is in such acceptance an opening. He suggests that *"[l]e catastrophisme éclairé consiste à penser la continuation de l'expérience humaine comme résultant de la négation d'une*

[4] All translations of Dupuy are my own.

autodestruction—une autodestruction qui serait comme inscrite dans son avenir figé en destin" ("enlightened catastrophism is to think the continuation of the human experience as a result of the negation of self-destruction: a self-destruction that would be inscribed in a future fixed as destiny"; *Catastrophisme* 216). Dupuy's catastrophism relies on a model of destiny—a self-destructive future that is fixed. But, at the same time, there remains a possibility of the "*négation*" of this future.

Dupuy's logic here is intentionally paradoxical: it is only once we have accepted the inevitability of catastrophe that we can begin to take responsibility for preventing its arrival. He elaborates:

> *Le catastrophisme éclairé est une ruse, qui consiste à séparer l'humanité de sa propre violence, en faisant de celle-ci un destin, sans intention mais capable de nous anéantir. La ruse consiste à faire* comme si *nous étions sa victime tout en gardant à l'esprit que nous sommes la cause unique de ce qui nous arrive. Ce double jeu, ce stratagème, est peut-être la condition de notre salut.* (*Petit métaphysique* 100)
>
> Enlightened catastrophism is a ruse, an attempt to separate humanity from its own violence—to make it a destiny, without intention but able to destroy us. The trick is to act *as if* we were its victim, while keeping in mind that we are the sole cause of what happens to us. This double game, this stratagem, is perhaps the condition of our salvation.

In this formulation, Dupuy proposes that we must adopt a simultaneous agency and lack of agency. We must orient ourselves toward a destiny that is not our own fault,

while—at the very same time—taking responsibility in the present for averting that destiny. It is both an acceptance and abdication of responsibility. But how will this become our "*salut*"?

Dupuy's "*catastrophisme éclairé*" is, like Crutzen and Stoermer's technocratic vision, an attempt to create a collective that can avert the coming disaster. Crutzen and Stoermer imagine a specifically scientific collective, one that will rely on scientific reason in order to avert disaster. However, in much the same way as Chadwick's "technocratic rationality" confronted a British populace suspicious of large-scale public health intervention, Crutzen and Stoermer's scientific rationality seems to discount the political nature of social intervention. As Chakrabarty points out, "[t]here is one consideration though that qualifies this optimism about the role of reason and that has to do with the most common shape that freedom takes in human societies: politics. Politics has never been based on reason alone" (211). To Chakrabarty, a reliance on purely scientific reason ignores that science too often fails to persuade when it enters into the political sphere.

In contrast to Crutzen and Stoermer's apparent reliance on a rational version of politics, Dupuy's move is more politically savvy. He recognizes that there are political disagreements that complicate any potential actions. Enlightened catastrophism, then, aspires to short-circuit debates that seek to assign the blame for climate change (as well as debates about whether or not it is actually occurring) by creating a sense of human destiny and then—at the very same moment—creating a shared responsibility *from this moment forward* for averting that destiny. In a sense, it

is a sophisticated version of a type of pragmatism: a shutting down of debate and a corresponding shift of focus to what can be done from this moment forward.

Yet, there are obvious difficulties with Dupuy's attempts to call into being a "we" that represents humans as a unified agent with a shared responsibility for preventing disaster. As Davis notes, the effects of the coming catastrophe are unlikely (at least at first) to be evenly distributed, as "most climate models project impacts that will uncannily reinforce the present geography of inequality" ("Living" sec. 5, para. 7). He continues:

> the current ruthless competition between energy and food markets, amplified by international speculation in commodities and agricultural land, is only a modest portent of the chaos that could soon grow exponentially from the convergence of resource depletion, intractable inequality, and climate change. The real danger is that human solidarity itself, like a West Antarctic ice shelf, will suddenly fracture and shatter into a thousand shards. ("Living" sec. 5, para. 8)

Davis's vision of the future is one in which any potential unification of humans in the face of a common threat will have to confront the ways that threat will take place within a set of social relations that make certain classes of people more vulnerable—relations that will consign certain populations to doom while protecting other populations. Any response to climate change in the near future will take place within capitalist and colonialist systems that will endanger any kind of collective action, or

indeed, any kind of collective imagination of what the future can and should look like.

But what will the future look like? All of these political visions of the future raise fundamental questions of representation, of what the future actually looks like and whether we can represent it. The question of representing disaster has been a key thread throughout this dissertation, and such questions will only become more urgent for us. In this project, I have identified a number of narrative and rhetorical strategies by which individuals and collectives in the nineteenth century could imagine and experience the disasters that threatened them. In this tradition, a certain kind of disaster narrative, as that dark mirror to Jameson's providential novel of which I spoke earlier, created a space for the representation of catastrophe: inundating floods, horrific railway crashes, deadly epidemics. The narrative logic in these novels provided a way to narrativize disaster. In the more synchronic exemplars (e.g., *Bleak House*), such narratives offer multiple perspectives on a catastrophe, attempting to trace, in Jameson's words again, "the interweaving of many plots and many destinies." It is a way of imagining disaster. But are there limits to the possibilities of imagination? Can a narrative—can we—imagine the End?

There is a problem of scale here. Writing in the wake of World War II and preoccupied by Hiroshima, the German philosopher Günther Anders offered a set of "Theses for the Atomic Age." The ninth thesis is a meditation on the ability to imagine disaster in our new world: "The basic dilemma of our age is that 'We are smaller than ourselves,' incapable of mentally realizing the realities which we

ourselves have produced. Therefore we might call ourselves 'inverted Utopians': while ordinary Utopians are unable to actually produce what they are able to visualize, we are unable to visualize what we are actually producing" (496). He goes on to note that this inversion "defines the moral situation of man today," such that "[t]he dualism to which we are sentenced is [...] that of our capacity to produce as opposed to our power to imagine" (496-97). For Anders, at a point in human technological history a threshold is crossed—a threshold beyond which we can no longer easily imagine our own abilities and the effects that they will produce.

Although Anders is writing here of nuclear annihilation, his diagnosis is equally applicable to life in the Anthropocene. Our ability to alter the geological equilibrium of our planet and the resulting large-scale catastrophes are indeed a challenge to the imagination. How can we imagine the myriad of extinctions that we have already caused, much less the many more that will occur? Or the desertification of large swaths of the inhabited globe? Or the acidification that may result in a collapse of the oceanic ecosystems? Or, finally, how would we even begin to imagine the complete extinction of the human species? It seems possible that we have placed ourselves into a narrative with an end that is—in important ways—unimaginable.

This is not to say that we have not tried to imagine the End. One recent popular book, Alan Weisman's *The World Without Us*, is a remarkable attempt at tracing what the world would be like (and how it would change) if humans disappeared. It provides a picture of the world that we would leave behind if "we all suddenly vanished. Tomorrow" (5). He traces what would become of our cities, our

monuments, our farms. He describes what will remain forever (or nearly so): our polymers, our nuclear waste. The book is an impressive thought experiment of what a post-human earth would look like. And yet, there is something missing here. Following the lead of (and relying on the cultural popularity of) post-apocalyptic narratives, Weisman's prefers to imagine the time *after* the apocalypse rather than the apocalypse itself. Weisman's book assumes the absence of humans, but he refuses to imagine how it happens—beyond the axiom that it occurs as a sudden event. Even this suggestion of the End as a singular event would seem to provide another version of imaginative avoidance. After all, the End is unlikely to be so evental.

Even if the end of the human world is not a singular event, a discrete occurrence at one precise moment in time, this hardly erases the question of a scale that exceeds our imaginative capacities. Rather than one final event, we might instead find ourselves facing a series of increasingly large and increasingly unimaginable disasters. We have already been warned of stronger weather events, wider humanitarian crises, regional (or perhaps even more widespread) wars. There may not be one moment of clear and certain apocalypse. Rather, it is more likely that we shall live in an uneasy space between disaster and apocalypse: not one single End but a series of cascading ends, a narrative that grows increasingly incomprehensible as it stretches into the future.

The question that I leave is not, then, the question of whether the End—in some version—is approaching. Although it may well seem increasingly likely based on a growing scientific consensus, predicting the future remains an inherently

difficult and uncertain activity. Rather, I want to end by bringing into our own time the question that has impelled much of my work in this dissertation: the question of narrative structures and their relation to experience. Can we find ways to imagine—and ultimately—to experience the End? How will we place each new disaster into a kind of coherent history, a history that—for the time being—remains a human history? Will we find new narrative logics, new forms, to accommodate the coming catastrophes? These are the questions that will motivate the cultural history of our disastrous present—and of our disastrous future.

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