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Some Examples of the Ecogothic in Contemporary English Language Fiction

Abstract: Since the publication of Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* in 2016 (Chicago University Press), critical attention has been focused on the issues that Ghosh raises in respect to the relation between the art of fiction and climate change. Ghosh draws his argumentation in part on Dipesh Chakrabarty's "The Climate of History: Four Theses". This paper explores the degree to which novels of leading English language writers, such as Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, might be considered representatives of that new genre known as the Ecogothic, a type of the Neogothic. The work draws on the distinction that Chakrabarty makes between the Vi-chian *verum-factum* and recent accounts of the working of the human in the natural world.
Keywords: Neogothic; Ecogothic; Amitav Ghosh; Verum-Factum; Barbara Kingsolver; Cormac McCarthy.

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> In climate science, you know, a normal is taking the recent experience — let's say the average of the last few decades — and using that as a guide for what the risks are that you face. And the problem is that fire is responding to climate change, and climate change is something that is going to accelerate. So there will never be a new normal.
>
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Historical preamble

This paper explores the degree to which novels of leading English language writers, such as Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, might be considered representatives of recently named genre known as the Ecogothic, a type of the Neogothic.[1] No generalized claims will be made during the course of this paper about the validity or the applicability of this recently coined term, Ecogothic. The work draws on the distinction that Amitav Ghosh and Dipesh Chakrabarty make between the Vichian *verum ipsum factum* and recent accounts of the working of the human in the natural world.

Since the publication of Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* in 2016,[2] critical attention has been focused on the issues that he raises in respect to the relation between the art of fiction and climate change. In the opening sections of that work on climate change he confronts the question of the Anthropocene, arguing that he would like to go beyond Dipesh Chakrabarty, who claims it to be characteristic of the Anthropocene that human beings have become geological agents and that we have always been biological agents.[3]

Ghosh claims that "the Anthropocene has reversed the temporal order of modernity. Those at the margins are the first to experience the future that awaits all of us."[4] The change in the world order, for Ghosh, is not sufficiently reflected by the literary works of the present. For him it is impossible to write about Venice without mention of the high waters that threaten the continued existence of the old city center; and paradoxically a very common language heard in Venice is Bengali, spoken by the Bangladeshis who have been displaced, uprooted from their homes and forced to emigrate, by the very world climatic forces that have determined the rise in sea levels that threaten Venice itself:

> Behind all of this lie those continuities and those inconceivably vast forces that have now become impossible to exclude, even from texts. Here, then, is another form of resistance, a scalar one, that the Anthropocene presents to the techniques that are most closely identified with the novel: its essence consists of phenomena that were long ago expelled from the territory of the novel—forces of unthinkable magnitude that create unbearably intimate connections over vast gaps in time and space.[5]

Ghosh then develops the argument that the genre of science fiction has predominated in depictions of the earth torn and battered by the forces of climate change. However he reserves a space, a very limited space, for a few literary artists who somehow have combined the power of traditional novels or works of fiction with the capacity to describe the world as it is becoming and as it will be. In other words, there works are not strictly science fiction. These artists, whom he singles out in the course of the *Great Derangement*, and numbers writers such as Margaret Atwood, Ian McEwan, Cormac McCarthy, Liz Jensen, T. Coraghessan Boyle, Barbara Kingsolver, Kurt Vonnegut Jr., J. G. Ballard, and Doris Lessing:

> Liz Jensen's *Rapture* is a fine example of one such; another is Barbara Kingsolver's wonderful novel *Flight Behavior*. Both are set in a time that is recognizable as our own, and they both communicate, with marvelous vividness, the uncanniness and improbability, the magnitude and interconnectedness of the transformations that are now under way.[6]

One of the characteristics of the novels that Ghosh particularly admires is that they are set in contemporary times, but the fact that these are not dystopic novels set in some near future, distant future or alternate present or future. These texts emphasize the "uncanniness and improbability,

the magnitude and the interconnectedness of the transformations that are now under way".

Ghosh draws his argumentation in large part from Dipesh Chakrabarty's "The Climate of History: Four Theses".[7] Chakrabarty argues that:

> Humans have become geological agents very recently in human history. In that sense, we can say it is only very recently that the distinction between human and natural histories—much of which had been preserved even in environmental histories that saw the two entities in interaction—has begun to collapse. For it is no longer a question simply of man having an interactive relation with nature. This humans have always had [...] Now it is being claimed that humans are a force of nature in the geological sense. A fundamental assumption of Western (and now universal) political thought has come undone in this crisis.[8]

In doing so he bases his argument on a long–standing distinction in the discipline of history between nature and the human–made world. This distinction ultimately derives from the 18th century Neapolitan philosopher of history, Giambattista Vico. In Vico the way of describing and justifying the two different kinds of intellectual activity as developed throughout his writing of the *New Science* is contained in the formulaic *verum ipsum factum*, "The true is identical with the created: *verum ipsum factum*, is how Croce summarized Vico's famous dictum."[9]

This distinction reflects Vico's understanding of the possible ranges of human intellectual endeavor, an endeavor which is strongly conditioned and mitigated by the political and social context of Naples at the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th centuries.

The dominant thought of the time held that it was impossible to understand fully the workings of the cosmos and nature which had been created by an omnipotent and inscrutable God. However, and here lies one of Vico's legacies to the science of history (and to Historicism),[10] it was possible to know the world made by man: the civil and political institutions, all the things that could be considered historical:

> 331. But in the night of thick darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity, so remote from ourselves, there shines the eternal and never–failing light of a truth beyond all question: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind. Whoever reflects on this cannot but marvel that the philosophers should have bent all their energies to the study of the world of nature, which, since God made it, He alone knows; and that they should have neglected the study of the world of nations or civil world, which, since men had made it, men could hope to know. This aberration was a consequence of that infirmity of the human mind, noted in the Axioms [236], by which, immersed and buried in the body, it naturally inclines to take notice of bodily things, and finds the effort to attend to itself too laborious; just as the bodily eye sees

> all objects outside itself but needs a mirror to see itself.[11]

That humans can know what they have made because these things are "within the modifications of our own human mind:" this position remains a stance that Vico takes in the second and third *Scienza nuova* from 1730 and 1744, respectively, even though the above citation is taken from the *Scienza nuova terza*. The argument is strongly related to Vico's interpretation of and feeling for Descartes, who felt that it was a waste of young people's time to learn history and poetry. Vico found the teaching of maths and what we now call the hard sciences to children the very opposite of what children need and what their minds are capable of grasping.[12]

Neither Ghosh nor Chakrabarty wade into the details of Vico's argument and the context of that argument, for both are concerned with the manner in which climate change is addressed by the communities to which each most clearly belongs, and more importantly, of the relations between Natural History and Civil History. In order to better concentrate the arguments of this paper, it is best to attend to the first two of Chakrabarty's theses: Thesis 1: Anthropogenic Explanations of Climate Change Spell the Collapse of the Age–old Humanist Distinction Between Natural History and Human History; Thesis 2: The Idea of the Anthropocene, the New Geological Epoch When Humans Exist as a Geological Force, Severely Qualifies Humanist Histories of Modernity / Globalization. The first and second theses directly address the questions related to the disciplines of history and of literary history, namely, how to address and modify the distinctions made between types of history and how these differences are best addressed in the age of Modernity/Globalization.

The Road and *Flight Behaviour*

In Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, a third-person novel published in 2006,[13] a nuclear winter seems to have descended on the earth as Father and Son make their way late in the solar year south to the coast. The coast remains unnamed. It is only made clear in the text that they are coming from the north, for they are forever going south.

Unextinguished fires can be seen in the mountains. The protagonists, the Man and the Boy, wear cotton masks, reminiscent of masks that westerners in the U.S. used to protect themselves from the blowing sand, to cover their faces as they journey south to the coast:

> It took two days to cross that ashen scabland. The road ran along the crest of a ridge where the barren woodland fell away on every side. It's snowing the boy said. He looked at the sky. A single gray flake sifting down. He caught it in his hand and watched it expire there like the last host of christendom.[14]

The landscape is wounded, the badlands of the west become the scablands of a doomed earth. The woodland is barren, non–fertile, the trees crash to the ground.[15] And the snowflake that falls dies out, expires, "like the last host of christendom." McCarthy here names a group of themes that become articulated throughout the novel, themes associated with the way things used to be, in which God and fire

are repeatedly named. In fact, the first sign of something gone terribly wrong alludes to Genesis, I.17,[16] "And God set them in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth:"

> The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions. He got up and went to the window. What is it? she said. He didn't answer. He went into the bathroom and threw the lightswitch but the power was already gone. A dull rose glow in the windowglass. He dropped to one knee and raised the lever to stop the tub and then turned on both taps as far as they would go. She was standing in the doorway in her nightwear, clutching the jamb, cradling her belly in one hand. What is it? she said. What is happening?
> I don't know.
> Why are you taking a bath?
> I'm not.[17]

In this scene, typical of Eliot's *Waste Land*, as Erik Hage points out, it is not unlike McCarthy to invert Biblical imagery: the light is a "dull rose glow".

In this passage the incomprehension of the pregnant wife becomes manifest. She either does not understand or does not want to understand why the husband is filling the bathtub. In fact, the few times that she is described in the novel it happens under the sign of non–acceptance, not of the new and changing situation but of her non–willingness to persevere, thus enhancing the Man's heroic status.

The position of the Man is that of the hero, of someone who acts, and of someone who looks nostalgically to the past when things were not so bad, to the time when God and the gods were present on the earth, but "On this road there were no godspoke men. They are gone and I am left and they have taken with them the world."[18]

> Then he just knelt in the ashes. He raised his face to the paling day. Are you there? he whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God.[19]

The figure of the Father ("I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you".) continually reminds the reader of McCarthy's debt to Ahab and to Herman Melville. On the way to the coast they meet a traveler named Ely who recalls Melville's Elijah, a similarly disheveled and crippled human who, like the Biblical Elijah is a prophet and who foretells the doom of the ship *Pequod*. The Father's interest in Ely is piqued:

> How do you live?
> I just keep going. I knew this was coming.
> You knew it was coming?
> Yeah. This or something like it. I always believed in it.
> Did you try to get ready for it?
> No. What would you do.
> I don't know.
> People were always getting ready for tomorrow. I didn't believe in that. Tomorrow wasn't getting ready for them. It didn't even know they were there.[20]

And a very short time later, under the dogged and persistent questioning of the

man, Ely begins to speak his mind, however paradoxically, as the Man says:

> I guess God would know it. Is that it?
> There is no God.
> No?
> There is no God and we are his prophets.[21]

But Ely relents when they begin speaking about the boy, as the man asks Ely if he would like to travel with them:

> You don't have to leave.
> I've not seen a fire in a long time, that's all. I live like an animal. You don't want to know the things I've eaten. When I saw that boy I thought I had died.
> You thought he was an angel?
> I didn't know what he was. I never thought to see a child again. I didn't know that would happen.
> What if I said that he's a god?
> The old man shook his head. I'm past all that now. Have been for years. Where men cant live gods fare no better.[22]

It remains unclear just what has caused the cataclysm and the Man never meditates on the cause: although motor vehicles filled with human remains, abandoned cities, falling trees, and even earthquakes clog their path. The land is dead, covered in ash which is blown about by the wind, and what survivors there are, roam the land, scavenging for food and the worst of them indulge in cannibalism, animated in their shoddiness and filth by a never–ending rage.

Eventually the Man and Boy make it to the unimaginable coast and the Father dies. The son is handed off to a family of refugees in the dead landscape. And the mother, too, speaks of God to the Boy:

> The woman when she saw him put her arms around him and held him. Oh, she said, I am so glad to see you. She would talk to him sometimes about God. He tried to talk to God but the be best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didnt forget. The woman said that was all right. She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time.[23]

The narrator, who has modulated into the authorial voice, adds to his earlier dreaming about times with his uncle and his wife, into a reflection on the literary with a reference to Ernest Hemingway's short story cycle, "Big Two–Hearted River" a story predicated on the post–war trauma of the main character, Nick Adams, and on the symbolically parallel conflagration of the Upper Peninsula during the last days of logging around Seney, Michigan. The first allusion happens near the beginning of the novel, when the Man is still nostalgic: "He stood on a stone bridge where the waters slurried into a pool and turned slowly into a gray foam. Where once he'd watched trout swaying in the current, tracking their perfect shadows on the stones beneath."[24] McCarthy closes his bleak novel with a further reference to Hemingway, saving this image from the "Big Two–Hearted River" for the last:

> Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber

> current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery.[25]

The reference is supremely literary and he seems to up the ante on Hemingway. McCarthy appears to be thinking about the future: "She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time." In this passage the syntax and lexicon of Biblical English is evoked (yet though it pass from man to man). Whereas he seems to be thinking about the past, it is a past laced with nostalgia. McCarthy would be in good company with Giacomo Leopardi, a supreme literary artist who saw nothing salvific in this world or in his fellow man. Leopardi, like most of his fellow Romantics, rejected the Enlightenment and its pretension to reason.[26] Leopardi, like McCarthy, was interested nonetheless in the constant humming of the universe.

Barbara Kingsolver in *Flight Behaviour* takes a less pessimistic and at the same time more complex approach to the struggle of human beings against nature, personified by the figures of Jack London and Ernest Hemingway. At the same time, the sciences of the Enlightenment, as depicted by Chakrabarty and Ghosh, create a rather complex relation to notions put forward by E.O. Wilson and others who hold that the solution to problems such as climate change created by the Anthropocene lies in Reason, and that the changes will succumb to the sciences. Kingsolver is less accommodating and generous than McCarthy, and less able to take the example of Hemingway as a model for future action:

> That was exactly the point of so many stories. Jack London and Ernest Hemingway, confidence swaggering into the storm: Man against Nature. Of all the possible conflicts, that was the one that was hopeless. Even a slim education had taught her this much: Man loses.[27]

The main protagonist of *Flight Behaviour*, Dellarobia Turnbow, is a frustrated housewife and high-school graduate who lives on a farm in rural Tennessee with her family. She lights out from her house on the family property to meet her lover, and stumbles upon a frightening colony, millions upon millions of monarch butterflies, who for some reason have found their way to the family's woods, having been forced to abandon their traditional homing ground in Mexico. She meets up with an environmental researcher, an expert on butterflies and climate change, Ovid Byron, who rents space on the family property. Byron tells her that the monarchs have made their way north because their habitat in Mexico is threatened by climate change and that he, along with a team of students, is trying to save the monarchs. Dellarobia is employed by the team, and she takes a liking to Byron and especially to his way of thinking which she finds congenial.

Her trek towards the butterflies, marks the passage as significantly frightening:

> The last part of the trail was the steepest, as far as she could recall from her high–school frolics up here. Who could forget that ankle–bending climb? Rocky and steep and *dark*. She had entered the section of woods people called the Christmas Tree Farm, fir trees planted long ago in some scheme that never panned out. The air suddenly felt colder. The fir forest had its own spooky weather, as if these looming conifers held an old grudge, peeved at being passed over. What had she been thinking to name that hunting shack for a meeting place.[28]

She continues on, assailed by her guilt at the assignation: "the forest had its own spooky weather," the ghosts of guilt are made to rise out of the very landscape. Confounded by what she, as an experienced country girl who surely knew the flora and the fauna of her surroundings, apprehended but could make no sense of:

> With relief she arrived on a level stretch of ground carpeted with brown fir needles. But something dark loomed from a branch over the trail. A hornet's nest was her first thought, or a swarm of bees looking for a new home. She'd seen that happen. But the thing was not humming. She approached slowly, hoping to scoot under it, with or without a positive ID. It bristled like a cluster of dead leaves or a down–turned pine cone. Like an armadillo in a tree, she thought, with no notion of how large that might be. Scaly all over and pointed at the lower end, as if it had gone oozy and might drip. She didn't care much to walk under it. For the second time she wished for the glasses that she'd left behind. Vanity was one thing, but out here in the wilderness a person needed to see. She squinted up into dark branches backlit by pale sky. The angle made her a little dizzy. Her heart thumped. These things were all over, dangling like giant bunches of grapes from every tree she could see. *Fungus* was the word that came to mind, and it turned down the corners of her mouth. Trees were getting new diseases now. Cub had mentioned that. The wetter summers and mild winters of recent years were bringing new pests that apparently ate the forest out of house and home. She pulled her jacket close and hurried under the bristly thing, ducking, even though it hung a good ten feet above the trail. She cleared it by five. And even so, shivered and ran her fingers through her hair afterward and felt childish for fearing a tree fungus.[29]

What she sees is strange, like a "sci–fi" movie, nothing has prepared her for this sight, and the only recourse she has is to compare it to a science fiction movie:

> A small shift between cloud and sun altered the daylight, and the whole landscape intensified, brightening before her eyes. The forest blazed with its own internal flame. "Jesus," she said, not calling for help, she and Jesus weren't that close, but putting her voice in the world because nothing else present made sense. The sun slipped out by another degree, passing its warmth across the land, and the mountain seemed to explode with light. Brightness of

> a new intensity moved up the valley in a rippling wave, like the disturbed surface of a lake. Every bough glowed with an orange blaze. "Jesus God," she said again. No words came to her that seemed sane. Trees turned to fire, a burning bush. Moses came to mind, and Ezekiel, words from Scripture that occupied a certain space in her brain but no longer carried honest weight, if they ever had. *Burning coals of fire went up and down among the living creatures*.

The imagery, despite the differences between McCarthy and Kingsolver, is very similar. The suspicion that she is losing her grip, the language of fire, and Ezekiel the prophet and Moses from the Old Testament. Ezekiel plays a similar role to Elijah in that he is a prophet. The entire passage from Ezekiel, I, 13, reads: "As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was like burning coals of fire, and like the appearance of lamps: it went up and down among the living creatures; and the fire was bright, and out of the fire went forth lightning." Perhaps Dellarobia is suffering from pangs of conscience. However, in chapter II, the Lord appears to the prophet Ezekiel and tells him that nation of Israel has been rebellious, that "they and their fathers have transgressed against me, even unto this very day." (Ezekiel, II, 3). As in McCarthy, a day of reckoning is at hand.

But unlike McCarthy's character, Dellarobia has no other language outside of the Biblical one as she tries to speak to her husband, Cub, to communicate her experience of the changing world:

> "Do you know what they're saying about the butterflies being here? Dr. Byron and them? They said it means something's really gone wrong."
> "Wrong with what?" Cub asked.
> "The whole earth, if you want to know. You wouldn't believe some of the stuff they said, Cub. It's like the End of Days. They need some time to figure out what it all means. Don't you think that's kind of important?"[30]

But the butterflies have a very different way of perceiving the world around them. They are not conditioned by the millennial Bible, with its meanings that are given to the world through interpretations: "The butterflies had no choice but to trust in their world of signs, the sun's angle set against a turn of the seasons, and something inside all that had betrayed them."[31] Kingsolver is dedicated to understanding the way in which things of nature communicate, butterflies or bees, humans or cats, without recourse to language. The world is fresh for Dellarobia, and no speech about the Anthropocene, no biblical interpretation, can take the place of the humming universe.

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Notes

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5. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
7. Chakrabarty, « The Climate of History ».
8. *Ibid.*, p. 207.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 201.
10. James C. Morrison, "Vico's Principle of *Verum* is *Factum* and the Problem of Historicism", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 39 (Oct.–Dec. 1978), p. 579 ff.
11. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1984, p. 85. "[331] Ma, in tal densa notte di tenebre ond'è coverta la prima da noi lontanissima antichità, apparisce questo lume eterno, che non tramonta, di questa verità, la quale non si può a patto alcuno chiamar in dubbio: che questo mondo civile egli certamente è stato fatto dagli uomini, onde se ne possono, perché se ne debbono, ritruovare i princìpi centro le modificazioni della nostra medesima mente umana. Lo che, a chiunque vi rifletta, dee recar maraviglia come tutti i filosofi seriosamente si studiarono di conseguire la scienza di questo mondo naturale, del quale, perché Iddio

egli li fece, esso solo ne ha la scienza; e traccurarono di meditare su questo mondo delle nazioni, o sia mondo civile, del quale, perché l'avevano fatto gli uomini, ne potevano conseguire la scienza gli uomini". Giambattista Vico, 'Principj di scienza nuova d'intorno alla comune natura delle nazioni', In questa terza impressione dal medesimo autore in un gran numero di luoghi corretta, schiarita, e notabilmente accresciuta, 1744, in *Giambattista Vico. Opere*, Fausto Nicolini (a cura di), La letteratura italiana: Storia e Testi, vol. 43, Milano; Napoli, Riccardo Ricciardi 1953, p. 479.
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