

No Prospect Conference Abstracts

David L. Clark, Keynote Speaker
McMaster University

“Kant’s Ice-World: Wondrous Affect, Peaceable Relations, and the Good-Enough Earth”

In the “First Supplement” of Kant’s 1795 *Toward Perpetual Peace*, the philosopher makes much of how we happen to inhabit a world that appears to have supplied even the barren Arctic wastes with the materials for the survival of both animal life and human settlement. No doubt thinking of the displaced populations of his own embattled age, Kant begins by remarking that the cruelties of war have from the start driven human beings even into “the most *inhospitable* regions” (332) of the globe the philosopher’s adjective, *inhospitable*, bearing weighty connotations in a text that elsewhere identifies the peaceful future of humanity with the irrepressible imperative to welcome strangers and to be welcomed as a stranger. Banished from home, and compelled to migrate into otherwise repellent lands, human beings learn that war is always already *world war*. And yet, to Kant’s canny amazement, amid all this founding loss, all is not lost. People are forced to flee into the least habitable expanses, yes, but even these desertified surroundings are strangely sustaining. Exactly how this happens is almost as interesting to Kant as the remarkable fact that it occurs at all, at once non-emphatically and in plain sight. Something like providence or perhaps fate or “the great artist Nature” (Kant moves restlessly between each of these heuristic figures, committing himself to none) ensures that the vast regions of the world that are maximally hostile to life are also liveable, and make room for life and thus for death. That’s remarkable, Kant remarks several times, as if trying to convince himself that what astounds deserves astonishment. But “Nature’s foresight arouses most wonder by the driftwood it brings to these barren regions (without anyone knowing exactly where it comes from), without which human beings could make neither their boats and weapons nor their huts to live in” (333). Not in spite of these unpromising circumstances, but precisely because of their sparseness, “various peoples” are “first brought into a peaceable relation to each other and so into understanding, community, and peaceable relations with each other” (333).

My paper explores this oddly effusive and under read moment in Kant’s text, and makes a case for the role that wondrous affect and a feeling for the “just-enoughness” of the world plays in philosopher’s avowal of peace and his denunciation of war. Kant’s affirmation of this winter wonderland, in which so much is made of so little, seems at first naive, even laughable. The idiocies of Voltaire’s Pangloss come to mind—an allusion that puts to us that philosophical wonder is cited as much as experienced, or rather experienced as a kind of affective citation. Amid this complexly mediated milieu,

Kant sounds gormless but I argue that this stance is another expression of a knowing naiveté that permeates *Toward Perpetual Peace*, whose very form, modelled on earlier peace projects, is a figure for well-meaning, if guileless and inconsequential anachronism. Kant's arctic astonishment is not a case of marvelling at "an Arcadian, pastoral existence of perfect concord and mutual love" (*Idea for a Universal History*, 45), a world he often rejects as dopey and unconscious. No, this peaceable kingdom is conspicuously a cold pastoral. Were it not for some driftwood and moss, it might not exist at all. Here peace is compelled by exigency rather than morality. It is an unforgiving universe, an animal planet of eating and being eaten, of living life on the very threshold of not. What then is the nature of Kant's wonder? What is *wonderment*—no wonder without wonderment, without a kind of judgment, as Marshall Brown reminds us—amid this curious constellation of human and nonhuman animals, winter and war, peaceableness and just-enoughness?

Why evoke a winter wonderland and this oddly generative poverty in wartime and in earnest of peace? What does it mean to draw sustenance from a "good-enough mother" or an unobtrusively sustaining "environmental-mother," as Winnicott might say? Sustenance, repleteness, just-enoughness, and sustainability come together here in ways that are hard to parse, but quietly affirm a recalibration in Kant, a tentative movement from the good will of practical reason to the good environment that enlivens the anthropological subject. Amid the polar wastes, in which nothing goes to waste, not even the most inconspicuous piece of driftwood, the philosopher marvels at the indeterminacy about whether the world comes to us or we to it. The driftwood floats by, from god knows where, Kant says, and amid these accidental flows, human beings pause, scoop up the detritus, survive, and fashion a world. It could so easily have been otherwise, he makes a point of saying, but it wasn't and isn't. Does wonder here take the place or actively displace mourning? Kant does not regret a loss but affirms the living on of a relationship to the given, once, in the form of a fabulous anthropological conjuring, sharply obvious, set off against the blankness of that arctic origin, but now diffused throughout the cultural field, and perhaps as culture "itself." Such a strange dream: the driftwood and us, the elemental donation and those who will have counted themselves to be *l'adonné*, the gifted. Twice he returns to this detritus, which starts to take on a strange thingly life of its own, an inanimate object that lives and breathes and has its (own) being. You get the uncanny sense of what "we" look like from the point of view of that driftwood, or amid the archipelagic churn of things. Is the driftwood rather a kind of "transitional object"? It has resilience, perdurability, and possesses a kind of autonomy. It is wood and it drifts, and yet, strictly speaking, it is only "driftwood" when we say it is so. Like a "transitional object," it is not a hallucination, but not simply a thing either. Kant imagines human beings putting that once living and now queerly reanimated material to work—building dwellings, making weapons and yet manages also to let the driftwood be what it is, replete. It is just-enough. Imagine that.

David Collings
Bowdoin College

“Melting the Sublime: Transcendental Aesthetics in the Era of Climate Change”

One who surveys the high Alps today no longer encounters natural phenomena that are absolutely great, as Kant would require of any object that is capable of triggering sublime experience; instead, as the Alpine glaciers melt away, they hint at a comparison between their might and that of anthropogenic climate change, in which case the Kantian sublime itself is melting away. Such a shift bears as well on the poetics of *Mont Blanc*, especially on its celebration of glacial sublimity. This paper reads our moment through this problematic, exploring the **possibility that the loss of the absolutely great undermines** transcendental aesthetics as well as its political counterpart in what Kant calls “the sign of history.” If we sustain our place within the tradition of this problematic, we may be left with an ethics of the ruins, a politics without hope.

Jacques Khalip
Brown University

“Sacred Heard”

This paper revolves around the notion of the "common," and in contrast with recent theorizations of the term as the source for productive change and becoming, it considers how themes of extinction and scarcity surface in the writings of several romantic writers for whom the common signals passive, non-generative and non-relational modes of resistance and encounter. In this way, romanticism reflects on a different ethos that entertains the disappearance of the human.

William Keach
Brown University

“Prospects in Ruins”

At the end of P.B. Shelley’s utopian poetic drama Prometheus Unbound, the imageless Demogorgon tells a future liberated humanity what it must do “to reassume/ An Empire” over re-emergent despotism. The pronouncement unfolds through five infinitive phrases, culminating in “To hope, till Hope creates / From its own wreck, the thing it contemplates. (4.5734). Shelley’s text offers here a utopian version of Benjamin’s “dialectical image,” in which present and future as well as past and present “flash into a constellation” (as Miriam Hansen puts it). In the shape of Shelley’s characteristic reflexive

syntax, we are made to see the “good place” as “no place” or “non-place”— and vice versa. The negative moment of the process is powerfully caught in the idea of “Hope” as the name of an affective commitment that not only survives its “own wreck” but finds its prospective continuation on this very destruction, this ruin of itself.

My argument will link the dialectic of utopian politics to the ideologies and practices of Romantic ruin culture as it comes to be shaped and reshaped during the period of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars. Shelley wrote most of Prometheus Unbound, he tells us in the Preface, amidst “the mountainous ruins of the Baths of Caracalla, among the flowery glades, and thickets of odoriferous blossoming trees which are extended in ever winding labyrinths upon its immense platforms and dizzy arches suspended in the air.” This prospect in ruins as scene of writing grows out of a tradition extending back through Volney and Gibbon to Poggio Bracciolini in the fifteenth century. Here it is a scene of writing constructed upon and suspended within an ancient ruin of imperial self-promotion and public self-cultivation, transformed and occluded by resurgent natural profusion that is itself a force both ruinous and revitalizing. Political hope of the kind Shelley articulates in Prometheus Unbound merges with even as it emerges out of ancient and modern imperialism’s massive investment in ruin—in the acquisition and display of the ruins of earlier empires, in the transfer and restitution of ruins from one regime of imperial power to another. Romantic hope is, in these senses, multiply constituted in and through ruin. It exists as a process of persistence through its “own wreck,” and in determinative relation to the historical wreckage encoded and institutionalized in museums, state edifices and monuments, the burgeoning antiquities market, archaeological sites such as the Baths of Caracalla.

My talk will move from the critical utopian anti-imperialism of Prometheus Unbound to the dystopian vision of Mary Shelley’s The Last Man, at the end of which Lionel Verney faces the dwindling away of human futurity as he wanders among the deserted palaces and ruins of Rome. Isolated in the paradigmatic center of ancient empire, Lionel decides to “write a book” and persists in this decision even as he asks the inevitable question, “for whom to read?” The circumstance of writing with no prospect of readers enacts a kind of limit-case for the spectrum of discursive hopelessness. Lionel himself contemplates the paradox and can only continue to write by entertaining the fantasy that “this world” will be “re-peopled, and the children of a saved pair of lovers . . . wandering to these prodigious relics of the ante-pestilential race,” may find his manuscript. Between these two Shelleyan examples I may comment briefly, if there is time, on empire and ruin futures in one or two other P.B. Shelley poems, in Barbauld’s Eighteenth Hundred and Eleven, in Canto 4 of Byron’s Childe Harold, and in Keats’s The Fall of Hyperion. My argument will engage relative recent reflections on utopian political imagination by David Harvey and Fredric Jameson, as well as John Tresch’s new book, The Romantic Machine: Utopian Science and Technology after Napoleon.

Sonia Hofkosh
Tufts University

“Everyday/Material/Event (or, Barbauld Does the Laundry)”

This paper will take up the problem of no prospect by narrowing its view to the eventualities of everyday life as rendered in the recursive poetics of Anna Letitia Barbauld’s “Washing-Day.” Where the panoramic perspective of *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* projects the end of empire and a tenuous futurity, Barbauld’s more limited or partial perspective in “Washing-Day” explores how the most mundane and routine experience can function as a significant event or turning point, an occasion, that is, in which something happens, something is determined, brought into existence or into consciousness, opened to possibility, or even more, to change. Her meditation on doing the laundry unfolds as a process, a series of rhetorical or stylistic movements or turns that operate formally somewhat like the volta in a sonnet, though here multiple and open ended, rather than rounding to a neat conclusion in a rhymed couplet. In the context of her attention to the intimate relations between embodied personhood and material object in the practices of everyday life, including writing and reading poetry, “Washing-Day” examines the question “why washings were” as a question about what emerges and what persists in the face of no prospect.

Forest Pyle
University of Oregon

“Icons of No Prospect: On the Still Life of Dying”

Taking as its principal texts two versions of the end of the line, my talk explores how Romantic images of oblivion generate their own shrines filled with the iconography of no prospect. My points of reference are Joseph Severn’s drawing of “Keats on his death bed” and the last poem Shelley published during his life, lines “Written on Hearing the News of the Death of Napoleon.” I want to consider how the images in these two texts place the pictorial “still life of dying” at the late Romantic pivot between seeing and hearing, between the saturation of feeling and its evacuation. Finally, I hope to reflect upon how these icons — those that occasion, compose, or are depicted in these texts -- point us toward a reliquary of the unredeemable.

Orrin Wang
University of Maryland, College Park

“Techno-Magism, Coleridge’s Mariner, and the Sentence Image”

Inundated by new media, we find ourselves everyday confronted with different forms of techno-magism, our skill as users to make things happen that, when pressed, we can’t really explain; our ability to make something out of nothing. But this dimension to techné is as old as the concept itself; beholden neither simply to one specific medium nor one particular historical period, techno-magism (like modernity or contemporaneity) can in fact be productively approached as a transhistorical phenomenon allegorized in especially vivid form in what we call Romanticism. A consideration of Coleridge’s gloss in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as a reading app, one structured by montage in a way that both recalls and complicates Jacques Rancière’s concept of the sentence image, refines this formulation further, whereby Romanticism can be understood as a site where two forms of techno-magism reside: where something is made out of nothing through the dialectic and something is made out of nothing through catachresis and imposition. The question of the relation of those two modes of techno-magism is a pressing one, as the choices we have when responding to the ecological catastrophe proleptically haunting Coleridge’s poem make clear to us today.