

Seeing through the End Time: From Lord Byron's "Darkness" to The Dark Mountain Project

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Abstract: This essay contends with the dark side of environmental literature by examining Lord Byron's apocalyptic poem "Darkness" (1816) ecocritically, drawing on Timothy Morton's concepts of *dark ecology* and *ecological thought* to ask how darkness functions in Byron's literary depiction of the end of days. Arguing that the poem moves beyond an elegy for nature to instead mourn the loss of community in crisis time, this essay points towards the unimaginable feminized future that the poem reaches blindly towards and concludes with a reference to contemporary ex-environmentalists The Dark Mountain Project who consider darkness the primary ecoaesthetic of their "uncivilized writing."

Keywords: darkness; ecocriticism; dark ecology; ecological thought; apocalypse; prophecy

The literary discipline of ecocriticism—most basically defined as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty xviii)—heralds English Romantic poets as the forerunners of ecological consciousness in the Western world: in his book *Ecological Literary Criticism* (1994) Karl Kroeber hails the English Romantic poets as “proto-ecological” (42); more recently, James McKusick has advanced a stronger claim that they “were the first full-fledged ecological writers in the Western literary tradition” (19, emphasis mine). McKusick is, however, quick to point out that in tracing the emergence of ecological understanding amongst these poets it is necessary to take note of both the “idyllic Romantic conception of the natural world as a place of vital sustenance and peaceful coexistence” as well as the complementary “nightmare vision of a world threatened by imminent environmental catastrophe” that is so often overlooked by scholars (29). This essay looks specifically at Lord Byron's poem “Darkness” (1816), a dream-like vision of the end of days that received scant attention at the time of its publication and continues to occupy the margins of literary criticism today. Early critics of the poem dismissed it as unreadable for attempting to “imagine what cannot be imagined” (Paley 5), and it is likely that early ecocritics, centered around death-phobic, conservationist ecological thinking, would likewise have found “Darkness” difficult to digest (Morton, “Dark Ecology” 263). Although critical tradition until now has been largely unable to accommodate Byron's apocalyptic poem, this essay enables “Darkness” to speak to

the ever-broadening project of ecocriticism—an experiment in pushing the boundaries of early ecocritical discourse to contend with the dark side of environmental literature—so that space opens up to think through both the poem and this emerging critical field in new ways.

Towards a Darker Ecocriticism

Timothy Morton acknowledges the perverseness of “reading Byron as an ecological writer” but asserts that it is precisely his divergence from the well-worn path of Romantic nature writing that makes Byron such a compelling figure for ecocritique, as a poet who challenges “a too limited and ideological view of ecological literary criticism” (“*Manfred*” 155). Morton’s own work has aimed at expanding the purview of ecocriticism, and my exercise in reading Byron’s poem ecocritically serves as a trial run in working through Morton’s concepts of *dark ecology* and *ecological thought*, both of which serve to recuperate darkness, negativity, and irony back into our conceptions of the natural world as a more accurate and perceptive way to experience fully the ecological principle of interconnectivity. This essay serves as a starting point to examine darkness as an eco-aesthetic in contemporary environmental literature. By reflecting on the concept and aesthetic of darkness in Byron’s poem, I hope to lay the historical groundwork for reading darkness in the “uncivilized writing” of the contemporary artistic collective of self-styled ex-environmentalists known as The Dark Mountain Project, establishing not only the “historical continuity of a tradition of environmental consciousness” that Jonathan Bate is eager to uncover (*Romantic Ecology* 9), but also the historical roots of darkness in ecological literature.

Morton himself is quick to cast “Darkness” aside in favor of turning his ecocritical lens onto *Manfred* as a more subtle display of Byron’s “unorthodox environmental awareness,” gesturing only briefly to ecocritical interest in “Darkness” by referencing Bate’s reading of the poem in light of “the year without summer” that followed the 1816 volcanic eruption of Indonesia’s Mount Tambora (“*Manfred*” 155). There is more to be said about the ecological resonances in Byron’s poem than simply unveiling the natural phenomena that likely prompted him to pen his apocalyptic vision and, to Bate’s credit and others, there has been some interesting preliminary work done in thinking through the poem ecologically. Many have speculated on the poem’s influences: several scholars have suggested that “Darkness” can be read in light of Byron’s

troubled personal life (Schroeder 118); Fiona J. Stafford notes the “effect of the French Revolution on the late eighteenth century imaginative malaise” and the proliferation of last-of-the-race narratives such as “Darkness” (162); and Enlightenment science’s theory of the entropy of the sun has been posited as contributing to the “genuine apocalyptic anxiety of the time” and Byron’s own “poetry of disillusionment” (Dingley 22, Stafford 167). In addition to these speculations surrounding Byron’s poetic motivations, Ronald A. Schroeder puts forth a distinctly ecocritical reading of the poem that underscores Byron’s “radical” vision of “nature wholly emptied of spirit” in contrast to conventional Romantic conceptions of nature as “animated and inspired” (113-15). Some of these sources begin to flesh out an ecocritical dialogue around “Darkness,” and my aim is to press this dialogue further by pursuing the significance of darkness in Byron’s poetic prophecy of the end of the world. Being that darkness is signaled explicitly in both the poem’s title and its concluding image, it seems necessary to consider how darkness can be understood to shape Byron’s “unorthodox environmental awareness” (Morton, “*Manfred*” 155): how does darkness inform Byron’s apocalyptic vision? What does darkness enable Byron to imagine? Might there be limitations to his dark vision?

Morton’s concept of dark ecology, a mode of thinking ecologically, may provide a way into an ecocritical analysis of Byron’s poem, for this kind of thinking “must include darkness and light, negativity as well as positivity” (*Ecological Thought* 16). Critical of overly optimistic “bright green” eco-thinking and “the sunny, affirmative rhetoric of environmental ideology,” Morton argues that a “more honest ecological art would linger in the shadowy world of irony and indifference” (*Ecological Thought* 16-17), a place Byron no doubt frequented in his literature. This ecological thought is a more accurate, open, and perceptive way to experience and contemplate *the mesh*—Morton’s term for the ecological principle of interconnectivity—because this way of thinking abandons the dubious ideal of harmonious, balanced Nature in favor of recognizing “negativity and irony, ugliness and horror” as equally present in the natural world (Morton, *Ecological Thought* 17). By doing away with Nature and lingering in darkness, Morton argues, true ecological awareness is born.

Seeing in the Dark

Byron's poem gropes towards ecological thinking amidst "the darkness of a dying world" (Morton, "Dark Ecology" 269). The speaker begins by declaring: "I had a dream, which was not all a dream" (1), positioning him/herself in a liminal space between waking and dreaming and in the "future anterior," the "impossible imaginary vantage point" necessarily occupied by a speaker who envisions the world's annihilation yet lives to tell it (Morton, "Dark Ecology" 254). The speaker beholds the dying universe in which stars "wander darkling" and Earth is "blind and blackening in the moonless air" (3-4). To imagine the unimaginable, the end of days, requires this spaced-out prospect, a privileged vantage point from which to view the intimacies between cosmic and earthly elements. From this vantage point the speaker follows the slow domino effect of the sun's extinction on earthly life, sketching a damned vision of interconnectivity. The speaker's gaze hones in on the ultimately doomed struggle for survival that plays out on Earth in the aftermath of the sun's entropic end, and by the poem's conclusion this gaze zooms out again to present an image of Earth as a "chaos of hard clay" consumed by darkness (72). Morton suggests that "[s]eeing the earth from space is the beginning of ecological thinking" for this expanded perspective enables one to become perceptive to the "vast space and vast time" of ecology itself (*Ecological Thought* 14, 42). Following this point we might ask how the speaker's perspective informs his or her representation of time-space in the poem, and how darkness informs this configuration.

In marked contrast to the rapidly accelerating change that characterizes the onset of modernity (Giddens 6), the horror of Byron's apocalypse is "deepened by the sense of time passing slowly and inexorably" as the world darkens and cools (Stafford 184). But just how long does it take for life as we know it to be extinguished in "Darkness"? This is indeed a slow entropy, but one cannot say with certainty how much time has passed within the poem's frame of reference, for time itself becomes disoriented. The speaker's out-of-this-world vantage point exists somewhere presumably outside of space *and* time, for once the sun's light is extinguished time can no longer be measured and thus no longer appears to pass: "Morn came and went—and came, and brought no day" (6). In Byron's apocalyptic vision time has come to an end: Earth is

“seasonless” and “the universe has moved into an entirely different order of temporal (or nontemporal) existence” (Byron 71, Schroeder 115). Darkness—that “present absence” (Morton “*Manfred*” 161)—initiates this transition into a new (non)temporality, a chronotope of end-time perhaps more accurately understood as a chronotope of the void, for “the flight from ruins into nothingness” is characteristic of Byron's oeuvre (Stafford 169). Once the sun is extinguished the passing hours become indistinguishable: “hour by hour” the remaining forest stands are burned until these fires are also extinguished and all references to time drop out of the poem completely (19). Space, too, is voided of all distinctions and boundaries in the darkness: “[t]he palaces of crownéd kings” and “huts” are burned alike, for “[t]he habitations of all things which dwell” are equally fit to fuel humankind’s feeble fires at the end of the world (11-12). Without the sun’s light to illuminate difference all falls under the equalizing mantle of darkness, which can be understood chronotopically in Byron’s poem, for the absence of light negates the passage of time as well as the demarcation of space: infinite darkness here serves as the end-chronotope, the un-chronotope, the dissolution of time and space.

Just as the levels of social hierarchy are blotted out by darkness, so too are the differentiations between species. Birds fall from the sky and “flutter on the ground” with the rest of the earth-bound beings and “the wildest brutes / [come] tame and tremulous” to join the last of the humans in their struggle for survival (33-35). Species boundaries blur as humans “gnas[h] their teeth and how[l]” like the once-wild beasts (32), now tamed, and the dying “shrie[k]” of the last humans echoes “the wild birds [that] shrie[k]” (66, 32). In his desperate clamor for survival “[m]an becomes bestial” (Tritt 27). Vipers “twin[e] themselves among the multitude” (36), dissolving into the crowd and literally becoming part of the last humans as they are “slain for food” and consumed (37). “The birds and beasts and famished men” alike all threaten to descend upon the corpse of a loyal dog’s deceased master (49), united in their shared starvation. In darkness the canine is an anomaly, fixed in the bonds of loyalty he defends his master despite his own hunger. Darkness breeds the famine that destroys the boundaries and regulations that had once governed the presumably civilized populace: cannibalism reigns as the distinction between edible and non-edible bodies falls away and the blind appetite of

survival sees that “[t]he meagre by the meagre were devoured” as men sat “[g]orging [themselves] in gloom” (46, 41).

Here darkness facilitates Byron’s poetic leveling of all forms of hierarchy and his revisioning of ordered Nature that no longer sees humans as the most dominant and exceptional of creatures, but instead recognizes the affinities shared amongst human and non-human animals, thereby “threaten[ing] the comfortable way in which humans appear in the foreground and everything else is in the background” in conventional representations of Nature (Morton, “Dark Ecology” 256). In this poetic darkness there is no longer a distinction between background and foreground, Nature no longer serves as a mere backdrop upon which human drama unfolds; the qualities that distinguish human from beast fade and Earth is indifferent to human suffering. Darkness facilitates Byron’s imagining of the mesh, quite literally “dissolving the barrier between ‘over here’ and ‘over there’” to engender a disorienting vision of totality in a chronotopic void (Morton, *Ecological Thought* 39). Morton proposes one word to describe this “state without a foreground-background distinction” and it aptly characterizes Byron’s abysmal darkness also: “madness” (*Ecological Thought* 30). Byron’s bleak poem is as sobering as it is ecological, at once dismantling the myth of balanced, ordered, harmonious Nature as apart from human culture and demonstrating the “fragility” of ecological interconnectivity (Bate, “Weather”).

Apocalyptic Vision or Eco-Prophetic Witness?

The profound resonance of the poem’s vision of ecological disaster in today’s climate of crisis leads Bate to champion Byron as a “prophet of ecocide” (“Weather”). One could read “Darkness” like other eco-apocalypse narratives as an “eleg[y] for the future” that seems to lament the loss of Nature which has not yet come to pass, thereby “fus[ing] elegy and prophecy” (Morton, “Dark Ecology” 254). Indeed, the poem underscores the power of sight in a darkening world and privileges the speaker’s prophetic vision as exceptional amidst the blindness of the last humans. Images of sight are repeatedly emphasized in the poem: in the light of their burning homes men “look once more into each other’s face” (15); once all of the burning forests are extinguished and fade to black some men “hid their eyes and wept” while others “looked up / [w]ith mad disquietude on the dull sky” (25, 28-29); and when the final two

surviving figures scrape together a pathetic flame, they “beheld / [e]ach other’s aspects—saw, and shrieked, and died—” (65-66, emphasis mine). These last two survivors of the dying human race expire at the *sight* of their “mutual hideousness” (67), their figures transformed by brutality and famine. Furthermore, the significance of sight is played up in the poem through enjambment: “Happy were those who dwelt within the eye / [o]f the volcanos” (16-17, emphasis mine). The line breaks at “eye,” a brief ocular meditation on the value of sight in a darkened world that further emphasizes the speaker’s privileged sight to be able to recount this prophetic vision of the end time.

Complementing this emphasis on sight, the poem also begins with words that cluster around light and fire which facilitate sight to emphasize the increasingly futile quest for illumination and warmth on a dying planet. The words “bright,” “sun,” “stars,” “morn,” “day,” “light,” “watchfires,” “burnt,” “beacons,” “blazing,” “torch,” and “fire” saturate lines 2-24, at which point the “crackling trunks” of the last burning trees “[e]xtinguished with a crash—and all was black” (20-21). Once the humans have burned up every last home and stand of trees their desperation rises and what little light can be rendered from “[t]heir funeral piles” grows “despairing” and sporadic (28, 22), falling on their faces in “fits” and “flashes” (23-24). These flickering man-made fires are microcosmic of the fading cosmic blazes of the stars and sun. When the last men meet “beside / [t]he dying embers of an altar place” they cobble together “a flame / [w]hich was a mockery” (57-58, 63-64), and this final flicker of light facilitates their dying vision of the mutual monstrosity to which they have succumbed. Once these last men expire, there are no longer any references to light or the sight that it enables; the form of the poem enacts the process of entropy it prophesizes. “Darkness” ends with words clustered around death, negation, and void: “still,” “nothing,” “silent,” “rotting,” “abyss,” “dead,” “grave,” “expired,” “withered,” “stagnant,” “perished” (73-81). Words that indicate absence or negation, the empty quality of darkness, are most highly concentrated in the image of Earth as “[s]easonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless— / [a] lump of death—a chaos of hard clay” (71-72), gesturing to the subsequent “sailorless” ships adrift on the deadened sea (75).

Despite the potential to read “Darkness” simply as Byron’s prophetic vision of eco-apocalypse, as Bate suggests, I wish to further complicate the poem’s association with prophecy. While the rest of humanity struggles and ultimately fails to maintain a degree of illumination in the darkening world, the speaker possesses a powerful visual capacity that enables him or her to recount the earth’s gradual descent into darkness. While “Darkness” is not exactly a Last Man poem in that all humans eventually die on Earth (Dingley 20), the poem does present the disembodied speaker as the final speaking and seeing figure in the blackened universe. As the only figure who can see through the darkness at the end of the world, the speaker is cast as prophet. Reflecting on the value of ecoprophetic writing in today’s Anthropocene era, Kate Rigby makes a useful distinction between the apocalyptic and the prophetic mode: the apocalyptic posits history as pre-determined, a matter of fate that requires preparation for “the millennial end that heralds a glorious new beginning,” whereas “the prophetic voice insists on the ever-present possibility of a change in direction in the present” (178). She questions the potential role of such narratives in easing our current ecological plight, at a time when disillusioned environmentalists and critics alike question the efficacy of art to ease real ecological crisis. The question here is where Byron’s poem stands on this visionary scale, both in his time and our own. Kroeber stresses the English Romantic poets’ conviction in “poetry’s practical value” (17), noting that their “strong beliefs in the practical intellectual, social, and ethical efficacy of acts of imagination” might appear unfathomable to later generations such as our own, that tend to vaunt science-based knowledge (19). Kroeber makes a strong case for the Romantic poets’ belief in the “superior utility of poetry” over science to articulate humanity’s place in the natural world (17), a point which begs the question: in a time when the efficacy of poetry to inform human conceptions of and interactions with the natural world was arguably more strongly felt than today, what could Byron have hoped to achieve by writing such a bleak apocalyptic poem? Can we read his poem as apocalyptic or prophetic, a harbinger of the end of days or an incitement to change?

On the one hand, his secular vision of the sun’s extinction completely abandons the apocalyptic millennial end, instead imagining Earth’s finale mired in famine and war. Moreover, “Darkness” does not anticipate a new beginning (Tritt 27): the poem ends in the void, in pure negation,

imagining an all-consuming, feminine Darkness. And yet, it remains difficult to square Byron's poem with the prophetic mode also, for the scientific theory of the sun's entropy holds all the weight of a final, fateful judgment that cannot be evaded. The poem presents the end of the world brought about by the purely natural event of the sun's entropy (Stafford 182), rather than the ecologically destructive behavior of humankind out of which so many contemporary apocalyptic narratives originate. For today's ecoprophetic visions of the end time brought about by human actions, in the context of the very real threat of ecocide, the role of the prophet is clear: "to remind the people that if they carry on as they are doing, the future will be exceedingly bleak" (Terry Eagleton qtd. in Rigby 178). In an age of climate change, these narratives imply a readership that is composed of modern, self-reflexive subjects who stand to be transformed by the text's prophetic insight into eco-ethical subjects with the capacity to right the course of history towards a sustainable future—the recognizable *live green to save the planet* rhetoric of environmentalist discourse. Conversely, for Byron the future is already foreclosed and so to what end might "ecoprophetic witness" aim if the cultivation of the ecologically aware modern subject cannot possibly alter the inevitable entropy of the sun (Rigby 184)?

Moreover, Byron's secular apocalypse does not presume a heavenly afterlife or any sort of spiritual future once the earth has died, nor can his poem claim to rest assuredly on today's (naive) comfort in the potential for redemption and regeneration on another planet once Earth has been made totally unlivable by the never-ending growth model of capitalism. "Darkness" essentially posits that the end of the world is inevitable and that absolutely nothing will follow, effectively "forestall[ing] redemptive visioning" and foreclosing all "futural possibilities" (Khalip 626, 623). Byron does away with "providence" and the "hope that the last generation of men will become the first of a new and better world" (Dingley 30, Stafford 182); in fact, he seems to reject hope all together—but to what effect? There is only one mention of hope in the poem: "[a] fearful hope was all the World contained" (18). This line comes partway through the beginning of the poem, amidst the cluster of words denoting light and fire, immediately before the last of the blazing forest stands has extinguished into blackness. The placement of this line is telling: at this point, when light from burning trees still illuminates the planet, a degree of hope

that not all life is lost remains, though tempered by fear to suggest a hesitant recognition of the certainty of total destruction once the light goes out. The form of the poem takes us through the ups and downs of such “fearful hope” (18), in which flickers of light and hope surface, only to be dashed out again almost immediately. In lines 19-21 the description of the burning forests is studded with em-dashes, generating poetic momentum that takes the reader from the hopeful sense that the burning forests might lift the veil of darkness to the brutal realization that this resource will inevitably burn up. Each em-dash propels the reader forward to follow the progressive consumption of the trees, until finally the light from this conflagration is “[e]xtinguished with a crash—and all was black” (21). Similarly, while war ceases momentarily at the onset of the darkening sky, it is renewed again as famine sweeps the planet. All signs of hope, however meager they might be, are quickly cast aside until only darkness remains.

Beyond Elegizing Nature

Morton was right to suggest that Byron’s work sets him apart from many of his contemporaries and would prove challenging for ecocriticism to contend with, for if hope is understood to be the “dominant romantic mode” (Kroeber 8), what can be made of a poem that seems to shut down all possible futures and snuff out every last flicker of hope for evading ecological catastrophe? What can we take away from a poem of imminent doom, if not prophetic knowledge of a foreseeable future that can be avoided by some sort of eco-conscious behavioral transformation? The poem’s historical context amidst the aftermath of the French Revolution and the strange weather of 1816 that brought on famine and ensuing social turmoil suggests that Byron was likely weighing a social critique on the breakdown of community incited by troubled times, particularly the greed and selfishness engendered during famine. Every potential site of hope for the banding together of community and the uniting of individuals to face the terrors of a dying planet are abruptly dashed in the poem, and the selfishness of human nature exposed (Stafford 183).

If “Darkness” can be said to lament a loss, it is the loss of community and the loss of humanity engendered by the crisis of the darkening globe. In the center of the poem words cluster around consumption and famine to highlight the degree of selfishness to which humans have sunken

during the end of days. Images of ravenous consumption are repeated throughout, first hinted at in the cities that were “consumed” as men burned homes for fuel (13), and reaching their highest concentration between lines 37-55, between the vipers slain for food and the death by starvation of all but the last two men. The words that pepper this segment of the poem serve to emphasize the fixation on food that is top of mind during a famine as well as the wretched depths to which a starved appetite will sink: “food,” “glut,” “meal,” “[g]-orging,” “famine,” “devoured,” “famished,” and “hunger” (37-55). As Stafford astutely observes, Byron’s vision of a “collective ending” is “made ironic by the underlying view of human nature as selfish . . . [f]ar from uniting people, imminent death increases their inherent selfishness, while reducing all individuals to the common pursuit of useless attempts at survival” (183). Ironically, the only figure in the poem to maintain any semblance of dignity and care is the loyal canine, an animal capable of showing the only shred of compassion left in a world completely devoid of humanity.

Byron’s critique is most clearly weighed in the segment of the poem dedicated to recounting the horrors of cannibalism and humanity’s descent into barbarity as men take on beast-like qualities in the struggle for survival (note that the gender-specificity here is intentional and reflects the absence of women from the poem, a point to which I will return). An every-man-for-himself mentality spurs the dwindling population on and the momentary cessation of war in response to the onset of the end of days is quickly surpassed by a cannibalistic warfare that sees “a meal . . . bought / [w]ith blood” (39-40). When the last two men on Earth meet, the tragedy of Byron’s bleak outlook on humanity reaches a pinnacle: though these men are from the same city, suggesting a potentially shared connection, they are “enemies” and the famine that has wracked the planet has so disfigured them as to etch “Fiend” upon their brows (57, 69). Rather than presenting a solitary survivor, the last of the race, as would become convention in Last Man narratives, Byron specifically imagines two survivors—enabling him to present the breakdown in community and utter lack of humanity exhibited by the last humans as the world descends into darkness. Part of what is so compelling about “Darkness” is precisely Byron’s envisioning of apocalypse as a “shared disaster,” an end-time experience “common to all” (Stafford 183). In so doing, the ecoprophetic potential of “Darkness” lies not in an underlying prescription for how to prevent ecological catastrophe, but rather in its chilling vision of the

failure of community in the midst of crisis that holds real resonance and weight for both Byron's troubled times and our own. Herein lies the crux of the poem's critical function: in the face of certain destruction the poet sidesteps the futility of advocating ecologically-sound behaviors to reroute history towards a more sustainable future, instead taking stock of the depths to which human nature can fall in a time of crisis as both a means of timely social critique and an anticipatory proscription against such inhumanity in the event of darker days ahead.

If we are to read Byron's poem as elegiac, then the lost object for which the poem mourns is precisely this loss of community in crisis time, making "Darkness" stand out from most eco-apocalypse poetry that tends to mourn the loss of Nature. Morton suggests that "the future of ecological poetry is that it will cease to play with the idea of nature" as ordered and harmonious, thereby transcending the elegiac mode that would have us "mourn for a monster" ("Dark Ecology" 255, 265). The ecological thought enables us to recognize nature as inhuman, radically different, irreducibly strange, and ultimately incoherent (Morton, "Dark Ecology" 265), akin to Byron's radical "dis-spiriting" of Nature (Schroeder 113-19); in so doing, we realize that an elegy for Nature is paradoxical, for we cannot mourn the loss of something we never really had (Morton, *Ecological Thought* 105). By blurring the boundaries between human and non-human animals and envisioning apocalypse as an "entirely natural" (Stafford 182), "purposeless, planless" occurrence in a universe wholly devoid of order (Schroeder 114), Byron alludes to Morton's central thesis: there is no Nature. "Darkness" does not suggest that the balance of Nature has been destroyed by human actions, instead Byron distances himself from this vision of ideal Nature altogether and instead presents an image of a chaotic, disordered universe that ends due to the natural principle of entropy.

In moving past an elegy for Nature, Byron also seems to anticipate another characteristic of Morton's ecological thought, for this mode of thinking "has to do with warmth, tenderness, hospitality, wonder, love, vulnerability and responsibility" (*Ecological Thought* 77). The realization that there is no Nature coincides, for Morton, with "realizing that we're always already responsible for the other" (*Ecological Thought* 55). What is truly at stake in the ecological thought, then, is "how to care for the neighbour, the strange stranger . . . It forces us

to invent ways of being together that don't depend on self-interest" (Morton, *Ecological Thought* 135). Byron's poem does seem to lament the breakdown of community, in turn enacting the capacity of the ecological thought to "compel us to imagine collectivity . . . by choice" (Morton, *Ecological Thought* 135). However, despite the fact that "Darkness" offers a dark vision of (in)humanity that can be read as a social critique, it is here that we begin to recognize the limitations of Byron's ecoprophetic poem: in presenting his bleak vision of the breakdown of community in the face of crisis, Byron seems unable to go far enough in imagining the unimaginable—that is, an alternative to the masculine version of history that is extinguished along with the sun.

Imagining a Feminized Future and Thinking Complicity

In his consideration of the Last Man texts of Felicia Hemans and Mary Shelley, Gary Kelly argues that the two "represent history as masculine, that is, characterized by ambition, conflict, war, and imperialism, and thus as a relentless cycle of destruction and oblivion" (199). This is precisely the representation of history put forth in "Darkness," a masculine history bent on competition that is ultimately unsustainable. As referenced earlier, curiously absent from Byron's imagining of the end of days are women. The only feminine figure in the poem is Darkness herself, revealed as "She" in the poem's concluding line and presented as the all-consuming void that overtakes the universe (perhaps hinting at Byron's sexism). Largely implied in Hemans' and Mary Shelley's work is the idea that the doomed trajectory of this masculine history ought to be remedied with a "feminization of the public, political sphere" and thus the "feminization of history, or the future" (Kelly 199, 203). Byron also seems to allude to the necessary feminization of the future in "Darkness," however it is precisely this feminized future that remains unimaginable by the poem's end. The end of time-space is followed by Darkness herself, explicitly feminine, but also characterized as a void of nothingness. Perhaps the result of his atheism and thus his refusal of redemption narratives, the only future that Byron seems able to imagine in light of his social critique of the horrors of masculine history and the scientific theory of the sun's entropy is one of total nothingness. "Darkness" imagines the destruction of a world of men, and thus of masculine history, but fails to imagine the feminized future to which

it points—this future becomes the ultimate unimaginable time, so instead Byron opts for total annihilation. Unlike Hemans and Shelley, he is unable to imagine a feminized future that could come after the destruction of the masculine world that lacks any semblance of community. It is here that Byron begins to diverge from Morton's ecological thought, for this mode of thinking is founded on a recognition of interconnectivity that incites us to imagine new forms of community. Byron's omission of women from "Darkness" suggests the root of his poem's imaginative limitations, for this blindspot likely inhibited any attempts to imagine other possible (feminized) futures.

Another way in which Byron's poem diverges from ecological thinking is in its inability to think complicity. While "Darkness" shares several affinities with dark ecology, the speaker's obvious detachment from the catastrophe he or she witnesses challenges our ecological reading of the poem. "The form of dark ecology is that of a noir film," Morton argues, and as such the narrator typically "begins investigating a supposedly external situation, from a supposedly neutral point of view, only to discover that she or he is implicated in it" (*Ecological Thought* 16-17). The ecological awareness prompted by the noir form relies upon the narrator's realization of "her or his entanglement in and with life-forms" and so the inevitable complicity that this entails when examining environmental destruction (Morton, *Queer* 279). If it is the case that "[t]here is no metaposition from which we can make ecological pronouncements" (Morton, *Ecological Thought* 17), then the speaker in "Darkness," who is clearly removed from the apocalyptic scene, maintains a troubling ignorance of his or her connection to the dying Earth. While on the one hand seeming to correspond with Morton's conceptions of ecological thinking and dark ecology, Byron's poem also fails to think ecologically because the speaker's spaced-out point of view is at so great a distance from the horrors of the end of days as to render the speaker blind to his or her complicity in ecological catastrophe: "[t]he ecological thought permits no distance" (Morton, *Ecological Thought* 39). The trouble with reading "Darkness" ecologically is that the poem's apparent recognition of interconnectivity fails to lead to an understanding of complicity or to foster a commitment to community or mutual care. Being able to see the mesh, or totality, can be terrifying (Morton, *Ecological Thought* 40)—and it seems that the poem's speaker

catches a glimpse of the interconnectedness of everything but does not know what to do with this profound ecological awareness, and so sinks into dark oblivion.

Finding Hope in the Dark

While Byron's poem does in many ways seem to anticipate elements of dark ecology, in the final analysis "Darkness" does not go quite far enough in advancing a truly ecological thought, the result largely of the poem's failure to imagine the unimaginable of a feminized future but also the speaker's own inability to think complicity. To conclude, I will suggest the relevance of this ecocritical reading of "Darkness" for considering darkness as an ecoaesthetic in contemporary ecological literature. This preliminary exercise in reading Byron's poem ecocritically prefigures my work on The Dark Mountain Project and their deployment of darkness as the primary aesthetic of their creative project. My research posits The Dark Mountain Project's "uncivilized writing" as a case study in ecological thinking and practicing a dark ecology (*Uncivilization* 13). Whereas "Darkness" suggests aspects of these two concepts but ultimately cannot make the imaginative leap necessary to take us to the other side of eco-apocalypse and imagine community in or after the end time, The Dark Mountain Project is interested in precisely this imaginative leap. In *Uncivilization: The Dark Mountain Manifesto*, Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine, the founders of the underground movement, explain the premise of their project: humanity is already in the midst of an end time, "poised trembling on the edge of a change so massive that we have no way of gauging it. None of us knows where to look, but all of us know not to look down" (9). The task of the Dark Mountaineers is to look down into the darkness, as the speaker of Byron's poem does, to face these culminating crises head-on by distancing themselves from "the story of civilization" and its attendant myths of progress, manifest destiny, and perhaps most importantly, Nature (10); however, unlike Byron's speaker this group is committed to building new kinds of community amidst the darkness of a world in ecological crisis, and at the heart of their project is uncivilized writing that examines darkness in order to produce new forms of art, literature, and perception that offer "new paths and new stories, ones that can lead us through the end of the world as we know it *and out the other side*" (emphasis mine *Uncivilization* 17).

Whereas Byron's poem reaches an impasse at apocalyptic prophecy, a blockage that inhibits the imagination of what might come after the destruction of masculine (unsustainable) history, uncivilized writing is offered as precisely the act of imagination so urgently needed in today's era of ecological crisis so as to foster new ways of thinking and being that can take us beyond our current untenable and precarious system of global capitalism and environmental degradation and into an as-yet-unknown future. While Byron's poem fails to make the imaginative leap—an enjambment if you will—needed to take us to the other side of eco-apocalypse, The Dark Mountain Project sets out to do just this by bearing witness to the already declining fate of civilization as we have come to know it in its Western-dominated, capitalist form and collecting stories that will serve as the bedrock for alternative futures. Despite the marked differences between Byron's "Darkness" and The Dark Mountain Project, the legacy of the English Romantic poets resurfaces in the shared conviction of the "critical role" that artists have to play in responding to ecocide and the power of "words and images [to] change minds, hearts, even the course of history" (*Uncivilization* 12). Darkness facilitates a very different conception of end time for the Dark Mountaineers, who believe: "[t]he end of the world as we know it is not the end of the world full stop" (*Uncivilization* 20), but rather the conclusion of human civilisation and the beginning of an unknown future. It is the aim of my current research to ask how darkness informs conceptions of 'the end' in the uncivilized writing of Dark Mountain, and particularly how dark ecological thought might offer imaginative potential for what comes next, for the premise of Dark Mountain is that it is in darkness that hope for the future lies: "Together, we will find the hope beyond hope, the paths which lead to the unknown world ahead of us" (*Uncivilization* 20).

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